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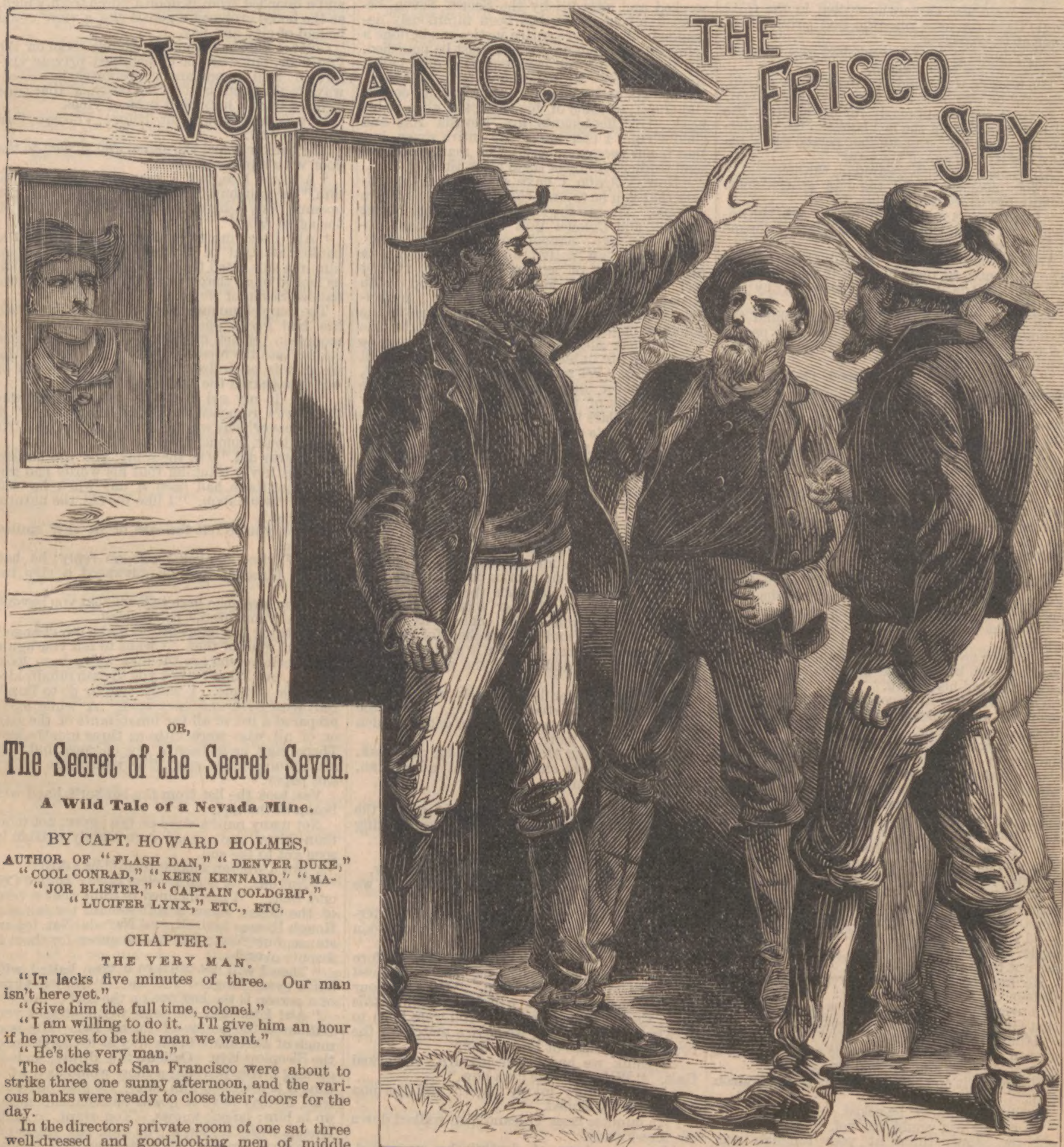
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OR,

The Secret of the Secret Seven.

A Wild Tale of a Nevada Mine.

BY CAPT. HOWARD HOLMES,
AUTHOR OF "FLASH DAN," "DENVER DUKE,"
"COOL CONRAD," "KEEN KENNARD," "MA-
"JOR BLISTER," "CAPTAIN COLDGRIP,"
"LUCIFER LYNX," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE VERY MAN.

"It lacks five minutes of three. Our man isn't here yet."

"Give him the full time, colonel."

"I am willing to do it. I'll give him an hour if he proves to be the man we want."

"He's the very man."

The clocks of San Francisco were about to strike three one sunny afternoon, and the various banks were ready to close their doors for the day.

In the directors' private room of one sat three well-dressed and good-looking men of middle age, and it was from two of them that the words just recorded came.

"THE MAN FROM 'FRISCO IS MY GUEST," CRIED THE SLEUTH OF PUZZLE BAR, TO THE CROWD, "AND YOU CANNOT HAVE HIM NOW."

Colonel Butler Bolt was one of the best known men of 'Frisco, and was at the head of the most prominent banking-house there, the Gold Eagle Bank.

A few people did not like him because there was a rumor that in earlier life he had been a tough and desperado among the gold mines; but now he had the manners of a well-bred gentleman, and in all 'Frisco there was no man more liberal than he. Children he had none; he lived alone with a young ward in an elegant house, and everybody knew that some day Lura Bolt would be the richest woman in California.

Colonel Bolt's companions in the directors' room on the day of which we write were men of his own age, which was near fifty.

One of the pair was a heavy-set man, with close-cropped gray whiskers and a cold, almost expressionless, eye. He was known as Gideon Galt, or Gray Gid in some parts, and it took no scrutiny to tell that he had been sport and cool head all his life.

The third man was the very opposite of the others.

While Colonel Bolt and Gideon Galt had good physiques, almost gigantic, he was slim and almost fleshless, with a sallow face and a mild eye; in short, he looked like a person who had dropped in to look after a little balance in the Gold Eagle Bank.

Nobody would have taken this person for a Mormon, yet he belonged to "the Saints," and Colonel Bolt and Gray Gid knew that, as Mormon Mort, he was well known in several places outside of Salt Lake City.

Such were the three who waited in the Gold Eagle Bank for some one who had promised to come at three o'clock.

"The hour is here," remarked the banker glancing at his watch again.

The hour of three had arrived and the person, whoever he was, had not kept his appointment.

Beyond the sumptuously furnished room the cashier was placing the last books in the ponderous time-lock safe, and another person was shutting the front doors of the bank.

All at once a man appeared on the step.

"Too late, sir," said the man at the door. "Bank has closed for the day."

"I don't want any of your cash," was the answer. "I think Colonel Bolt is waiting for me in his private office."

The young teller threw a look at the cashier who happened to meet his look at that moment.

"That is the gentleman expected, Toby; let him in."

The next moment the door closed behind the stranger, who smiled at the cashier as he passed his window on his way to the directors' room, which was straight ahead.

"Ah! here he is!" exclaimed Galt as the strange man entered and removed his hat.

"Colonel Bolt, let me present Volcano Van, the man whom I have recommended for the important mission."

Colonel Bolt received the man with undisguised cordiality, and as their hands touched their eyes met.

"If this is the man, I gladly welcome him!" said the banker. "Sit down, sir. But you haven't met our friend here." And the banker waved his hand toward the Mormon, who was looking at the caller with a great deal of interest.

"Ah! this is my Utah friend!" exclaimed Volcano Van, reaching his hand across the table and closing on the Mormon's long fingers.

"You have met before, I see," remarked Colonel Bolt.

"Once or twice," answered Van, a faint smile stealing from beneath the handsome black mustache that hid his mouth.

The Mormon neither confirmed nor denied the assertion, and Volcano released his hand and dropped into a chair.

The expected visitor was the youngest man in the group. He was not over thirty; his figure was physical perfection, his face strikingly handsome, his eyes black and full of animation. His hair was profuse and so long that it touched his broad shoulders and helped to give him the air of mountain and plain which he carried.

It was not difficult to see that this Volcano Van was no city sport, although his clothes did not suggest a wild life outside.

Nobody in looking at him as he was dressed that day could separate him from the mountains, the gold-camps and the sport's domain beyond the paved avenues of 'Frisco. He was an eagle in borrowed plumage, and the plumage did not become him, either.

He had come to the conference indorsed by Gideon Galt, and when Colonel Bolt had looked him over from head to foot he was ready to say that Gray Gid had made no mistake.

After the introduction the 'Frisco banker opened a drawer in the table and took out a map of Nevada and its gold-camps.

He spread it on the cloth and looked at Gideon Galt.

"Shall I explain?" he asked.

"I rather you would, colonel. I guess you've got the whole thing at your tongue's end. Forge ahead."

Colonel Bolt produced a blue pencil and made an excellent circle near the Utah line. The

lower rim of the circle touched the thirty-ninth parallel.

"Now to the story," he went on, dropping one finger into the circle as he looked at Volcano.

"Within this circle we want a battle fought. You may know, and you perhaps do from the little Mr. Galt has told me about you, that I have drawn my line around Puzzle Bar, a mountain camp inhabited by a lot of the coolest fellows above-ground. Well. There is supposed to be near Puzzle Bar a secret mine owned and worked by a stock company known as the Secret Seven. This company is all-powerful, not only at the Bar, but through a great scope of country roundabout. It allows no one to trench upon its territory; it has in its employ a pack of sleepless spies, headed by a man who, as a watch-dog, has no equal in this country, big as it is."

Colonel Bolt paused as if to note the effect of his words on Volcano, and appeared to be astonished at the imperturbable countenance. The man was listening calmly, and did not seem anxious to hear the conclusion of the narrative.

"We know all this because the company's watch-dogs have been tested," resumed the banker. "We know that Old Owlet, the head of this pack, deserves all the praise that has been heaped upon him. His underlings are no fools. We have the best of reasons for wanting to discover the secret mine. We want to get a diagram of its interior, and its exact location. I will say this: that the mine worked and guarded by the Secret Seven belongs to a person who has been infamously defrauded—that before entire justice can be done a crime of enormous magnitude must be punished. At the head of the company is a man called Rough Romeo. He sometimes comes to 'Frisco, but always under guard. Whenever he comes, Old Owlet, or some of his satellites, glide at his heels. His lieutenants are Nevada Nat and Gold Grip. I can name the entire seven, but that is not necessary here. The man whom we send thither will meet them all in time."

"Now, Volcano, I have said enough to indicate that you have been called here for a certain purpose. We are the league against the Secret Seven," and Colonel Bolt waved his hand toward his two companions across the table. "We want an active and fearless agent, a man capable of coping with Old Owlet and his Nevada watch-hounds, and with Rough Romeo and his six so-called 'invincibles.' We expect this agent to go alone to the bonanza country; but he shall not fight the whole battle single-handed. When he goes he carries his life in his hands; the chances are all against him. We sent two men into the country, but they never came back to report. There are in the vaults of the Gold Eagle Bank twenty thousand dollars to the man who places on this table the secrets of the Seven within six months. We do not send our agent out with the dangers underrated. We want him to understand everything before he starts. He will be suspected the moment he enters the territory; the suspicious eyes of Old Owlet will be upon him day and night; he will always have a human ferret at his heels. To be suspected there means more than espionage; it signifies death! But, the man who goes thither in our employ, goes to right a great wrong. As he works he discovers, bit by bit, a past that demands the wiping out of the banded Seven and their spiss. I have no more to say, Volcano. You come to us by Mr. Galt's invitation, and are vouched for by him. You understand that the offer is made to you—twenty thousand dollars for the secrets of the Seven."

The 'Frisco banker leaned back in his chair, and looked into the stranger's face. Above the dark mustache the eyes seemed to get a sudden twinkle, nothing more.

Gideon Galt and Mormon Mort did not speak. "When must the start be made?" asked Van, breaking the silence.

"At once."

The man leaned over the table and studied the map for a moment as if mentally calculating route and distance.

"I can go to-morrow," he at last spoke.

Colonel Bolt uttered an exclamation of joy. "Then you are our man. Mr. Galt said we could depend on you."

"Never mind what Mr. Galt said," interrupted Van. "I want to know if I start soon enough if I leave 'Frisco to-morrow?"

"Yes. I want to see you in private before you go; some final instructions," and he glanced at Gray Gid and the Mormon. "Give me your hand, Volcano! There will be no failure this time; there will be a report. You were born to give us victory. Now, we have a match for the roughs and toughs of Puzzle Bar!"

"I think we had better adjourn," remarked Galt. "We've got our man now."

"I feel victory in my hand!" and Mormon Mort actually smiled.

Five minutes later Volcano Van walked down the street alone.

"Into the jaws of death!" he exclaimed. "Into the very mouth of hell, for what?—twenty thousand dollars! No! for more than that!"

CHAPTER II.

A LYING MORMON.

WHEN Colonel Bolt of the Gold Eagle Bank saw Volcano walk from the directors' room, he was confident that the right man had been found at last.

He had laid all the dangers of the enterprise before him, and he had not quailed.

It is true that he wondered what manner of person this could be who would deliberately risk his life for twenty thousand dollars, a sum not considered large in the then flush days of 'Frisco.

Could it be that Volcano had some hidden motive for embarking in the enterprise? Could he be going into it from a mere love of adventure, from the excitement and the risks the work would entail? Was he such a money-lover that twenty thousand dollars could rush him into the jaws of death with hardly one chance in his favor?

Questions of this nature puzzled the 'Frisco banker not a little after he had dismissed the sport.

The banker had appointed a meeting with the new agent at his house that night. The sport had accepted this invitation, and eight o'clock that evening found Bolt waiting for his man.

The 'Frisco banker carried his love of luxury and a display of wealth into his home. His mansion was one of the finest structures occupied by the California nabobs, and, as already stated, he inhabited it with a ward named Lura.

The private library was on the second floor, and a door led from it upon a porch from which, as the house crowned a gentle rise, a view could be had of city and bay.

Colonel Bolt had another similar room on the first floor, but when he entertained private visitors or held important conferences, it was always in the room next to the porch, at that time covered with a luxuriant crop of vines.

It was half-past eight before Volcano Van rung the bell.

The banker heard the signal and turned to the door with a pleasant smile.

"A little late, but I can afford to forgive him," he murmured, and then waited till the opening door ushered in the splendid figure of the agent sport.

"Ah! I see; in new plumage!" exclaimed the banker at sight of Volcano who stood before him in a suit fitted for his journey, and in which he looked more than ever able to cope with the banded Seven of Nevada.

The genteel garments suited to San Francisco life had given place to a dark sombrero, a mountain jacket and close-fitting pantaloons stuffed into the tops of a pair of high boots. His waist was encircled by a belt, at each side of which appeared the butt of a revolver.

"I'm in my old feathers once more!" was the sport's response to Bolt's salutation. "A fellow never feels well in borrowed plumes. At least I don't, colonel."

"I never did," was the reply, and the banker went on, never thinking that his words had implied that there had been a day when he was not a 'Frisco nabob. "I like the old, the natural dress best."

"Then you've felt the ease of it, eh?" smiled Volcano.

The 'Frisco banker made no reply; he had caught himself; had he advanced a step too far?

"Your presence here tells me that you haven't changed your mind," he resumed.

"Nothing has happened to make me change."

"I am glad of that. I want to tell you again that I believe you are the man we've been looking for, but I don't want you to rush blindfolded into this scheme. I want you to go to Puzzle Bar with eyes and ears open. A while ago I prepared a list of all the inhabitants of the Bar, or of all who were citizens three months ago. There may have been a few changes, but they are unimportant ones. The names are all on this paper."

Van took the list from the banker's hand and began at the top.

Not many names were on the paper, not more than thirty, and as they were plainly written he soon got to the end.

"Not a woman among them?" he asked.

"Not one. It is an Eveless Eden," smiled Colonel Bolt. "I am inclined to think that several of the tigers have a soft side for the fair sex, Rough Romeo himself, and Nevada Nat for instance, but Puzzle Bar has no queen for them to dispute over."

"Then I will not fall into a trap baited with black eyes," laughed Volcano. "But what kind of a person is the last one on the list?"

"Ah! I thought the name would attract you. Caliban is the genius of Puzzle Bar. His is as much of a creature in his way as is Old Owlet of the Sleepless Eye. Caliban is a dwarf, so ludicrously misshapen that a show would have a fortune if it possessed him alone. He may be American, he may have a dozen nationalities mixed up in him; no one knows. You want to make friends with Caliban if you can, but you want to go slow, for the fellow is suspicious, shrewd and a mystery."

"I'll remember," remarked Van, glancing

once more at the name. "I'll be on the lookout for Caliban."

"And for Old Owlet. Remember him, too!"

"Just as if I have already forgotten the sleepless Cerberus of Puzzle Bar!" exclaimed the sport. "No, colonel; I am not likely to forget the man against whom I have been pitted."

The 'Frisco banker smiled his satisfaction and turned to the desk at his left hand. Unlocking a small door he took out a dark-brown envelope sealed with red wax and held it in his hand as if weighing it.

"Your final instructions I have written out and sealed," he went on. "You are not to open this until you are within five miles of Puzzle Bar. I want you to go into the fight doubly armed, and these instructions will thus equip you."

He laid the packet on the desk instead of handing it to Volcano and continued:

"I am glad that Galt selected you, but I have a curiosity to know where he found you."

The agent-sport started slightly, but the banker did not perceive it.

"I have met Gideon before to-day," and he smiled as he answered.

"Outside of 'Frisco, I presume?"

"Yes."

"And Mormon Mort? You knew him when you came to the bank?"

"I have also seen him before."

"In Utah?" asked Colonel Bolt, eagerly.

"In various places."

The next moment the 'Frisco banker leaned forward and lowered his voice:

"I don't want to be inquisitive concerning my partners, Volcano," he went on, "but I would like to know—"

He stopped abruptly and threw a furtive glance toward the door that opened upon the vine-covered porch.

"I would like to know a little something about Mormon Mort," he resumed. "As you know him, and as you are about to quit 'Frisco for a spell, have you any objections to telling me something about him?"

"Maybe I don't know very much," was the reply.

"I am sure you know enough to enlighten me. In the first place, is he really Mormon?"

"So far as I know, Mormon to the core."

Bolt looked disappointed.

"In the next place, how many wives has the fellow at Salt Lake?"

"How many does he confess to?" asked Van.

"To none. He says that he has no wife at present. Is that true?"

A smile wreathed Volcano Van's lips; a sparkle came to his deep black eyes.

"You must not believe all you hear, colonel," he answered in a light vein.

Color seemed to leave the 'Frisco banker's cheeks.

"Then the fellow has—lied!" he cried shutting his hand that rested on the desk.

"He has prevaricated just a little," assured the sport. "My friend, Mormon Mort, is a slick fellow, who is always on the lookout for number one."

"How many wives has he?" persisted the banker.

"Three, but all are not in Salt Lake."

"Ah!"

"One is now in 'Frisco."

Colonel Bolt started forward.

"By Jupiter! I want you to show me where she is!" he exclaimed.

"I don't think I could find her now."

"When did you see her?"

"A little while after the interview at the bank."

"Does he know she is here?"

"I rather think not."

"You may think all these questions strange, but the time may come when they will not appear so."

The next moment, and before Volcano could make reply, a piercing cry rung through the house, and Colonel Bolt left his chair with a name on his lips.

"Lura! That is Lura's voice! My God! what has happened to the child?"

Without bidding Van to follow he rushed from the room.

"Lura? That is the very person I've longed to see!" ejaculated the sport, and he followed Colonel Bolt.

Scarcely had the agent-sport left the room when the door leading upon the porch opened, revealing the head and shoulders of a man, the face hid to the chin by a close-fitting black cloth mask. Behind the mask sparkled a pair of eyes that glittered like a serpent's. They seemed to take in everything at a glance, and the first object that attracted them was the sealed envelope on the desk, which the banker and Volcano Van in their hurried rush to Lura's rescue had left behind them.

In an instant the masked man had seized the packet, but singularly enough, in its place he left a package exactly like it even to the seals! Then the masked intruder withdrew.

"We'll see whose game this is!" were the words muttered as the door let the robber out, and a moment later the man dropped to the ground.

"A weasel is never caught asleep!" he laughed, moving off. "Now, colonel, send your man into the death-traps of Puzzle Bar!"

CHAPTER III.

CUPID AT PUZZLE BAR.

"WHAT'S the matter with Caliban? He won't play anything, but sulks like a displeased wolf. I tried him twenty ways awhile ago. We don't want sulkers hyer. By Jove! I won't have 'em!"

"Whar is the hunchback?"

"At his shanty. Let 'im be. Mebbe he'll git over it afore mornin'. I'll give 'im till then."

"No; I'll try 'im now."

The last speaker left the stool he was occupying and moved toward the cabin door.

He was a giant fellow, in coarse shirt and pantaloons, and with a pair of big sparkling black eyes above his raven beard. Nevada Nat was one of the "chiefs" of Puzzle Bar, but the man who had complained of Caliban was still greater than he.

It was Rough Romeo, or, "King" Romeo, as he was sometimes called, a large, fine-looking individual of forty-five, with features a little dark for an American, but not unhandsome.

The two men when standing together, looked like twin giants, Ajax and Hector transported to the mountains of Nevada.

"You don't want to rile Caliban any more than he is at present," warned Romeo, as Nat paused at the door. "Hunchback though he is, you know we need him at the Bar."

Nevada nodded and answered with a slight smile.

He was crouched in one corner of his cabin like a sulky dog when I left him. But for one or two things, hang me, if I wouldn't have given him a touch of my boot."

"We can't afford to do that."

"Confound it, no," growled Romeo.

"Well, I'll try him," laughed Nat, as he left the room.

"Thar's somethin' that could be done with the pest if it wasn't for a certain person," muttered Romeo as he threw his feet upon the table and leaned back in the only chair in the shanty. "But we can't afford to cross that other person. Thar's the rub. We can't afford to offend the man who is life and safety to us at Puzzle Bar. No! I guess Caliban will have to have his own way, though if I could have my say, he'd emigrate to other quarters, mighty quick."

Meantime Nevada Nat was clearing the distance between the two cabins with rapid strides. "To-morrow is the day for the annual settlement, an' mebbe Caliban is sulking for a purpose," his thoughts ran. "He sulked just a little a year ago to-night, and when I induced Romeo to allow him an extra nugget, he soon got over his pet. I think he is playing the same game over."

It did not take the citizen of Puzzle Bar long to reach his destination, a cabin much like the one he had left.

He rapped lightly on the door and heard a voice between a growl and a welcome invite him inside, and Nevada entered.

The cabin had but a single occupant, a little bit of humanity, humpbacked and otherwise deformed. The head was unusually large and the face was not handsome. The arms were long like an ape's, and the fingers could touch the knees when their possessor stood erect.

This person was Caliban, the dwarf of Puzzle Bar, and the person of whom Colonel Bolt had spoken to Volcano Van.

The dwarf's eyes at first seemed to retreat deeper into his head at sight of Nat, but in a moment they sparkled as if with pleasure.

"Not so sulky after all," thought the giant, seeing the change.

"Sit down, Nevada," began Caliban. "Did you see King Romeo awhile ago?"

Nevada Nat was equal to the emergency.

"No. Why?"

"He was here—just left," continued the dwarf. "He didn't find me in very good humor, and I was mean enough to remain the same while he stayed."

"But you're in a better mood now?"

"A little better," answered Caliban, and the smile that accompanied the words showed that the dwarf's mouth was enormous and out of proportion even to his large head. "You see, when a gentleman is in love, Nevada, he lives between hope and despair about half the time."

Nevada could not suppress the laugh that bubbled to his lips.

The idea that Caliban was in love was, to him, the height of humor.

The dwarf did not scowl as the mountain sport gave vent to his surprise. He even seemed to enjoy the laugh, for his eyes got a pleasant sparkle.

"I am going to speak in all seriousness, Nevada," continued Caliban. "When King Romeo was here I was under a cloud, but I'm in the sunshine again."

"In other words the object of your love has noticed you, ha, ha."

"Not that, but I've got rid of the cloud," was the reply, and then the dwarf leaned toward Nevada and clutched his sleeve.

"You don't want to proclaim my love affair throughout the camp," he went on.

"Of course not if you want secrecy. But who is the fair one who has insnared you, Caliban?"

The dwarf dropped the sport's arm and drew back.

"I didn't think you'd have to ask *that* question, Nevada!" he exclaimed, giving the big sport a look of astonishment.

"Not when the world is full of pretty women?"

"There is but one in the world!" cried Caliban.

"Ho! then—"

"Yes, I have found her! She is in Puzzle Bar to-night."

"Not Madge?"

Caliban uttered a cry.

"Isn't she the only woman in Puzzle Bar?" he exclaimed. "She is to me the only beautiful creature in existence. I've heard the boys talk about the women they have seen in 'Frisco, Denver and the gold-camps, but what are they compared to Madge? Have you ever seen a more dazzling creature, Nevada?"

The handsome sport could not reply seriously, for the smile that carried away the astonishment until then visible on his face.

"Madge certainly is a beautiful girl," he replied. "I admire your judgment—"

"I knew you would. No man can condemn it, and none can say that I have not given my first love to the most beautiful creature under the stars."

"But, what does Madge say, Caliban? It takes two to play the game of hearts successfully you know."

"Oh, I've never said anything to Madge about my passion," answered the hunchback. "But she will not resist a person who lives for her all the time. Why, she dare not do it, Nevada!" and Caliban's eyes got a flash that was positively dangerous.

"I'm not one o' these fellows who love for a time just to fill in," he continued, the mad light suddenly fading from his eyes. "My passion increases with the days; it grows as I live, and Madge is the recipient of the love of a lifetime. Don't you think I will win in this game of hearts as you call it, Nevada?"

"If no one beats you," ventured the sport.

Caliban almost tumbled off the stool he occupied. The words, the suggestion, came like a thunderbolt from a clear sky.

He tried to answer Nevada, but could not. His face had grown dark, almost black with passion, and he looked like a person choking.

"You—don't—mean that?" he managed to articulate at last. "I cannot be beaten! The man who outwits Caliban in a love affair, will wish that he had never seen the sun!"

"Ho!" laughed Nevada. "That is no way to play the game of love. I see it is your first campaign, Caliban."

"And my last one!" cried the dwarf. "Do you want me to repeat my words?"

"It isn't necessary," returned the big sport. "Why, you may have a dozen rivals in Puzzle Bar. Think of the handsome men we have here—King Romeo, Gold Grip, to say nothing of myself. And thar's Owlet, an'—"

"That is enough!" interrupted Caliban. "I don't fear the whole crowd! I've taken no half-way ground in this affair. I'm clear over on the other side. Puzzle Bar will do well to let Caliban have a clear field."

"Go ahead!" encouraged Nevada Nat. "If you can win Madge, you'll be the successful man, as a matter of course."

"If I can win her?" repeated the dwarf, and the words came through his teeth. "If I do not, no other man shall!"

The sport appeared to take no notice of the last sentence which he heard, though the words were spoken in a hiss.

"Don't you wish me success?" asked Caliban.

"Can't I tell Madge that Nevada Nat indorses my suit?"

"Do you think it'd do you any good?"

"It might."

"Tell her, then."

"A thousand thanks. The time may come when I can repay this favor."

"Never mind it."

"You may forget it, Nevada, but Caliban never will. When I have won the one fair woman, I'll help you to the next fairest creature," and the dwarf uttered a laugh that seemed to transform him.

"By the way," he exclaimed, stopping suddenly, "the man who looked in at the Golden Fleece last night would be a fine addition to the Apollos o' Puzzle Bar, don't you think, Nevada?"

"I didn't see him."

"No? Well, some o' the boys did, among 'em Gold Grip, I think."

"An' Old Owlet?" asked Nevada eagerly.

"The sleuth wasn't thar," was the reply. "Well, we'll drop the man. I don't think he stayed. Now, Nevada, as I said awhile ago, I don't want my love affair posted in the camp. Time enough yet. When I have seen Madge, I will announce it myself, and receive congratulations."

A few minutes afterward Nevada Nat stepped out into the starlight. For a moment a smile

played upon his face and a gleam of merriment lit up his eyes, but both suddenly disappeared.

"This is a state of affairs I don't like!" he murmured. "There's another Richmond in the field, an' he comes from an unexpected quarter. By heavens! I must see to this!"

He walked back to Rough Romeo's cabin, which he found empty.

"Well," muttered Nevada Nat stepping outside again; "I'll go down to the Golden Fleece and hear something about the man who called last night."

A footstep sounded behind him, and, as a hand fell upon his shoulder, he heard the coarse but cheerful voice of King Romeo.

"I'm glad to find you here, Nevada!" laughed the head man of Puzzle Bar. "You are the very man I want to see just now. You shall be the first man to congratulate me. I have won!"

The start made by Nevada Nat told how the words had thrilled him. He lost color; his look became a stare.

"You have won what?"

"The heart an' the hand o' Nevada Madge! The girl has just consented—"

"To become your wife?"

"Yes."

"Then look out for the scorpion!"

And without another word Nevada left King Romeo in front of the hut.

CHAPTER IV.

UNDER OLD OWLET'S EYE.

"WHAT will Caliban say now?" queried the sport, and the veins in his forehead swelled as he clinched his hands. "I've a mind to go and break the news to the cripple, but I guess I won't. He'll find it out soon enough. Madge consented to become your wife, did she, King Romeo? Wal, I'd like to know what magic you used with her. We'll find out some day, maybe. Let it go now."

He walked away with one dark, scowling glance over his shoulder, a glance which told that from that hour something stood between the two partners of Puzzle Bar.

"What can the fellow mean?" muttered King Romeo, when he had been so unceremoniously left alone by Nevada Nat. "Who does he mean by the scorpion? Himself? Wal, he'd better not! Now that I've won the girl, I guess I'm strong enough to keep her. I ought to be, seein' that I'm head master hyer."

It was true that King Romeo had gained Nevada Madge's consent to the union, and it was singular that he should succeed on the very night that witnessed Caliban's avowal of love for the same person.

The reader will recollect that in the list of people given by Colonel Bolt, the 'Frisco banker, to Volcano Van—a list which purported to be a correct census of Puzzle Bar some three months before—the name of no female appeared.

The colonel had designated the place as an "Eveless Eden."

At that time Puzzle Bar was an exclusive camp, but, since that census, chance or fortune had brought Nevada Madge to the place.

The girl, for she was no more, was a fair young creature of nineteen, with deep brown eyes, full of animation, and with a graceful, willowy figure. She was just the creature to take up with the half-lawless life that existed at Puzzle Bar, and when she determined to make the camp her abode, a new cabin was built for her, and she was ceremoniously installed therein.

She told nobody from whence she had come, nor why she had concluded to become the only female citizen of Puzzle Bar. She seemed to have no secrets, however; her parents were dead, and the world was before her. She was an excellent shot with Winchester and revolver, and more than once at the faro table in the Golden Fleece she had taken an animated hand.

Everybody looked for Nevada Madge to captivate somebody, but Caliban, the hunchback, was the last person supposed to worship beauty.

The girl had avoided him for some reason, perhaps because, misshapen as he was, he was not a very attractive sight. More than once she had caught him eying her intently, but the matter of love was the last thing she thought about in connection with the dwarf.

Why should she not take up with King Romeo?

He was good looking, able to protect her, and, as the head of the gold-camp, had unlimited means at her command. She knew that there were guarded secrets at Puzzle Bar; she had seen Old Owllet and the men under him; she knew that every stranger who came to camp was watched by the sleepless eyes, that he was followed away and kept in sight until the human ferrets could report that he was no spy.

Certain journeys of King Romeo to San Francisco were not unknown to Nevada Madge. She knew that he went under guard, and that he was watched by Old Owllet from the time he left Puzzle Bar until his return.

It was not difficult for the girl to discover the seven men who formed the secret band of the mountain camp. She had never played spy, but there were things she could not help finding out, and this was one of them.

The gold mine was a secret one. It was a real

bonanza, enriching all who had a share in it, and the lion's share was King Romeo's. Next to him stood Nevada Nat and then Gold Grip.

Old Owllet was chief of police in the mountain camp, and a better one it could not have.

There was a tradition at Puzzle Bar that this human watch-dog never slept. The men believed it.

When he had a report to make, he made it to King Romeo, who, if it was important enough, delivered it in turn to his associates.

To Old Owllet was given the task of guarding the bonanza secret from prying eyes. Certain startling events, which need not be mentioned here, already told that he did his duty.

The secret was yet safe; that is, the location of the prolific mine was not known to any living person outside of Puzzle Bar.

Knowing what she did, and we have seen that it was a good deal, Nevada Madge could not have left the camp with impunity. She would have been followed by the sleepless eye, and if she attempted to use her discoveries, the Secret Seven would have received a startling report from the chief ferret of the camp.

Nevada Madge, therefore, had probably thought best to give her hand to King Romeo. If there were other suitors the act would settle the matter once for all.

As we have said, she never thought of Caliban. Did she think of any other?

Let us see.

When Nevada Nat left King Romeo, he was attracted by a light not far away. His eyes got a strange, eager glitter the moment they saw it.

"I'd like to know how it came about," he muttered. "Hang me, if I wouldn't like to discover what kind o' arts he used. I know that the thing is done, an' I guess I've got a right to congratulate her," and the handsomest man in Puzzle Bar went toward the light which soon turned out to be in a cabin. A few moments later his knuckles hammered lightly at a door, and the face that greeted him as it opened, appeared a little startled.

Nevada Nat walked in and turned upon Madge in the light of her lamp.

"You'll pardon this night call, I hope, but I can't help droppin' in to wish you—a happy time with *him*!"

It was evident that these were bitter words for Nevada Nat to speak; Madge could see in the last ones poorly concealed sarcasm.

"How did you find it out?" she demanded.

"He told it himself."

The girl showed her white teeth in a pretty smile.

"Well, he's a poor secret keeper!" she said. "Of course I did not tell him to keep it to himself, but I didn't tell him—"

"To tell it before the engagement kiss war cold, eh?" interrupted Nevada.

"No, not before morning, at least."

"Wal, he tole me awhile ago an' he seemed almighty willin' to get rid o' the secret. Warn't it kind o' sudden, Madge?"

The tall figure of the Puzzle Bar sport leaned slightly against the wall of the cabin, and with folded arms he was looking searchingly into the face of the girl before him.

Madge flushed at the question, and her dark brown eyes seemed to get a quick sparkle of indignation, just enough for the mountain sport to catch.

"I did not know," she exclaimed, "that I had to consult anybody in Puzzle Bar."

"An' you didn't have to," was the answer. "Everybody is his own master hyer when it comes to affairs o' this kind. No, you didn't have to ask anybody whom you shall marry, an' when, but you might have given somebody else a chance."

Nevada Madge looked at Nat, in doubt whether to treat his words seriously or to laugh.

He spoke seriously enough, but there was a deeply-buried twinkle in his eyes.

"Ah! who else wanted me, Nevada Nat?" suddenly exclaimed the girl. "Name the man and I'll apologize with all the grace I have."

"No apology would help it if he loved you, would it?" answered the sport. "Very well; go and apologize to Caliban."

Madge burst into a musical laugh.

"Caliban, the toad of Puzzle Bar?" she exclaimed.

"The little rattlesnake of Nevada!" was the response.

The girl laughed again, but she suddenly caught the sport's gaze and seemed to fathom it.

"May be some one else wants an apology," she remarked. "If he does he shall have it now."

Nevada Nat felt the thrust.

"I want nothing," he replied. "You have given yourself to the King of Puzzle Bar. I recognize the fact that you have a right to choose. I am nobody's guardian, Madge. I hope you'll never regret the choice, but you'll have to look out."

"What is that?" And the girl came toward the sport with a flash in her eyes. "I see now that King Romeo had a rival."

"He had! Thar! my secret is out!"

The girl stopped and then drew back.

"You—"

She checked herself.

"Yes, Nevada Nat thought as much of you as any living man ever can!" he suddenly went on. "Before the week is out I had intended to tell you this. For the last ten days I have been waitin' for an opportunity. But I have lost it all, fool that I am! No! another man has mesmerized you. I have lost the prize because of the arts of the boss sport of Puzzle Bar. Take him! If you love him better than any man you ever saw, become his wife; but I have a right to say, *beware!*" and the sport went toward the door slightly ajar.

"What is the threat you make?" cried Madge clutching him as he passed. "As God is my judge, Nevada Nat, I never knew you loved me!"

"Love is blind they say, ha, ha!" laughed the sport as he shook the girl loose. "The next time you'll go slow, Madge."

"The next time?"

"That's what I said, I guess! You've got more lovers than are in this camp. They're almost as numerous as Old Owllet's trails. Good night, my soon-to-be wedded seraph. If a shadow stalks between you an' the mountain altar don't blame Nevada Nat. For fortune's sake *don't!*"

He sprung away before Madge could detain him and was gone ere she caught her breath.

He appeared at the bar of the Golden Fleece, flushed over his interview with Madge.

"How do you like the country?" asked a voice at his elbow.

"It is the garden spot of the world."

The first voice was familiar to Nevada Nat, the second entirely strange.

As he filled his glass he glanced over his shoulder.

Old Owllet, the camp watch-dog, was talking to a handsome stranger.

"I don't know him," passed through Nevada's mind.

This was true, but they were soon to meet, for the stranger was Volcano Van!

CHAPTER V.

DANGER AHEAD.

THE spy had come to Puzzle Bar.

And what was bad for his future prospects, the eye of Old Owllet was already upon him!

Nevada Nat did not pay much attention to the stranger. He had not recovered from his somewhat exciting interview with Madge, and he knew that if the visitor was not what he ought to be Old Owllet would find it out.

He therefore took his drink in silence and passed out.

"Yes, this is God's country," he remarked. "If there's any better out o' doors the crow has never found it. When did you leave 'Frisco?"

This sudden question coming from Old Owllet was enough to startle the bravest, but Volcano Van did not quail.

"I left thar two weeks ago," he replied coolly. "I'm trying to see a little of the world—a bit of your Nevada paradise, you know."

"Goin' east, eh?"

"If I don't find a place that suits me."

"How is 'Frisco, anyway?"

Old Owllet leaned against the counter and looked carelessly into the agent-sports's face.

"Dull. Too dull for me."

"I've got a few acquaintances there."

"Oh?"

A singular twinkle came into the watch-dog's eyes.

"Yes, I know, let me see—Thar's my old time friend Colonel Bolt."

"Of the Gold Eagle Bank?"

"You know him, then?"

"I met him once at the bank."

The words were spoken in an off-hand manner that puzzled, or seemed to puzzle, Owllet.

"Then I know other gentlemen o' distinction in 'Frisco," he continued. "It's full o' fellows o' that sort," and he ended with a light chuckle.

Meanwhile just outside the Golden Fleece at the little window by the door three wild-looking, sharp-eyed men stood. They were typical mountain roughs in dark shirts and with black hair that shook over their shoulders when they walked.

The right hand of each man gripped a revolver, and their eyes were riveted upon Old Owllet and the man he was holding at the bar.

The ferret's face was turned toward the window, and, by looking over Volcano Van's shoulder, he could see the eagle eyes that almost touched the panes.

Was he waiting for a signal of some kind?

"They'd like ter show you Puzzle Bar by daylight," resumed Old Owllet raising his voice a little, and then glancing over the counter at the man who dispensed liquor at the Golden Fleece.

"We take pride in showin' strangers over the lay-out, don't we, Nantez?"

"Right you are, Owllet," grinned Nantez, who spoke with a noticeable foreign accent. "We've got nothin' hyer but a mountain town an' some scenery. You'll stay awhile, eh?"

"We'll let the future take care of that," replied the banker's man.

"It'll do it, too. Nantez, entertain this gent;

tell him all you know about the Bar an' its people. You've got a tongue that goes like clock-work. You'll excuse me, captain. To-morrow we'll meet again."

Owlet stepped back and touched the brim of his hat with a dark hand by way of parting, and a moment later he had gone.

The three men waiting outside stepped nimbly forward.

"We've got a little work on hand jes' as I thought," whispered Owlet. "The bonanza for the first time is in real danger unless we trip the spy in the outset."

"The spy?"

"The spy and sport from 'Frisco."

"That man in thar?"

"Nobody else."

"Who is he?"

"Sport an' spy."

"But his name?"

"Why that?" growled Old Owlet giving the inquisitor a look of rebuke. "He may be George Washington, but we don't care. Nantez is going to entertain him for a time, but thar's no danger of Nantez giving anything away. He may keep the spy in thar an hour, an' he may not hold 'im thirty minutes. You fellows are armed? Ah yes, I see. Well, you want to watch this door like three hawks. If the spy comes out he isn't to be lost; but he must not know that he is under guard. I'll be back before long."

The three men promised to carry out Owlet's instructions, and with a parting glance through the window the mountain sleuth started off.

"Catch me an' my ferrets asleep, hey? Wal, I guess not!" he exclaimed. "I'm in my element when I've got work like this on hand. Now, let me surprise an' delight the king bee of this mountain hive."

Old Owlet proceeded to a certain cabin and surprised its only occupant by his abrupt entrance.

"You?" cried the man looking up. "By Jove! you're the very man I want to see."

"I'm on hand, King Romeo," and Owlet dropped upon the stool beside the master's table.

"I kin wait a few minutes," mentally ejaculated the spy. "He wanted to see me; for what?"

"They say thar's a scorpion in camp," continued Romeo fixing his eyes on the head of the mountain spies.

"In Puzzle Bar?"

"Yes."

A grim smile came to the comers of Old Owlet's mouth.

"I guess you must have dreamed it, captain. Thar is a scorpion hyer sure enough."

"Then you know it!" cried Romeo.

"Nevada Nat warned me awhile ago, an' the way he did it led me to think that he had just made a discovery."

"I didn't know Nevada knew it."

"He must. When I told him that I am soon to present Puzzle Bar with a queen in every way worthy of it, he turned all colors an' said: 'Look out for the Scorpion.'"

Old Owlet started.

"Didn't Nevada say anything until you broke the news to him?" he asked.

"Nothing about the scorpion."

"Then, there must be two."

King Romeo was the startled person now.

"I'm glad you came," he resumed. "I want you to fathom this scorpion business. If I am to be stung because I have won the Queen o' Nevada I want to know it a little while beforehand. You understand it, Owlet? I want a chance to set my heel upon the scorpion's head."

Old Owlet nodded.

"I'll give you that chance, captain," he answered. "If there is a scorpion in Puzzle Bar I'll find him. I presume I can congratulate you. It is Nevada Madge, eh?"

"The Queen of the Wild West!" exclaimed Romeo. "I believe that I touched Nevada Nat's toes a little to-night. The announcement didn't go down in the easiest manner with him. Do you know whether he has looked toward Madge?"

"That is one of the things in which I take no stock—love," was the answer.

Rough Romeo tossed his head back and laughed.

"Never mind! you'll get there yet!" he cried.

"Not while the great secret is to be guarded!" ejaculated Old Owlet. "I am enlisted for life unless sooner discharged. Now to my business."

"Ah! you came for a purpose! Why didn't you say so awhile ago?"

"I wanted to hear about your scorpion, captain. Now you shall know something about mine."

As Owlet finished he leaned across the little table that partly separated them, and thrust one hand beneath his open jacket.

Rough Romeo's eyes were at once aglow with curiosity.

He watched his sleuth intently until he drew forth a bit of paper not wider than two swarthy fingers.

"I have heard from my 'Frisco correspondent," spoke Owlet as he unfolded the paper in a manner painfully slow. "He communicates a bit of intelligence which you should know. Here it is, captain. Read and digest," and Old Owlet

pushed the paper toward the impatient bonanza sport.

King Romeo sprung at once to the task, and the Nevada sleuth-hound leaned on the table with two black eyes studying his countenance.

"I guess he'll make a remark presently," muttered Owlet as Romeo read. "Thar's some news in that paper. Ah! he sees it now!"

At that moment a sudden change of color took place in Romeo's face, his lips met, and his breathing came in gasps.

He was reading a letter couched in the following terms:

"CAPTAIN OWLET:—

"The 'Frisco banker has secured a new man for the work—a man who has courage, tact, and splendid abilities for the game in hand. He has promised to perform the duty which has cost more than one life. The new man was recommended by Gray Gid, who makes no mistakes. Look out for him. He is called Volcano Van, but he may enter your territory under another name. His description will follow my signature. If you would serve your employers you must balk this new spy, or the great secret is lost forever. Don't sleep. Be on the alert. My game here progresses slowly, but surely. I will win in the end. Remember! Volcano Van is your match if you ever had one."

UTAH."

When King Romeo looked up from this letter and caught Owlet's waiting eyes, he had not breath to speak.

"It didn't take your breath, I hope?" grinned Owlet across the table.

"If it could not do nothing can," was the answer.

"When did you get this letter?"

"Yesterday."

The next question was natural.

"Who is 'Utah'?"

Old Owlet smiled.

"Utah is a man with whom I have dealt in secret. When I became sleuth for Puzzle Bar, you told me to serve you well. I have tried to do so. I have established a correspondent—a spy, if you wish, in 'Frisco. That letter is from him. 'Utah' is sometimes called Mormon Mort."

King Romeo evinced no surprise at the name, it was probably strange to him.

"The report has put you on guard," he remarked. "Of course, it beat the new spy to Puzzle Bar."

"By very little," smiled Owlet. "Volcano Van is here now."

King Romeo's look became a startled stare; the letter from 'Frisco fell from his hand.

"Where is he?"

"I left him a while ago at the Golden Fleece."

"Watched?"

"Watched!"

A moment's silence followed.

"Well, what are you going to do?" asked Romeo.

"I guess I'll resign in favor of Colonel Bolt's man."

"You? No! you're playing with me now, Owlet," cried the master of Puzzle Bar. "I want straight goods. What are you going to do?"

Old Owlet left his stool and looked down into King Romeo's face.

"I'm going to keep the secret safe!" he cried.

CHAPTER VI.

THE EFFECT OF A LOOK.

KING ROMEO gave Old Owlet a look of mingled pride and gratitude.

"If you say that the secret will be kept safe, safe it is," he ejaculated, and then he turned to the message from 'Frisco.

"I see here that 'Utah' says that his own game progresses slow but sure," he went on, glancing at Owlet. "May I ask you what that means?"

"Sartainly. Mo'mon Mort is looking after another wife," was the reply.

"In San Francisco?"

"Nowhar else, captain. He has got to play a cool game to get the woman he wants, but I guess 'Utah' is equal to the emergency."

King Romeo seemed to be interested in the Mormon's game for a wife.

"Who is the lady?" he asked.

"Nobody but Lura, Colonel Bolt's ward, an' the beautiful creature who shares his 'Frisco palace with him. Mormon Mort is killin' two birds with one arrow. He wants to line his pockets with gold the same time he gets a pretty wife. He's a shrewd fellow, an', from what I know of him, as merciless as shrewd."

"Colonel Bolt objects to the match, I presume?"

"And so does the girl."

"Then the Mormon has up-hill work."

"Not too much for him to overcome," smiled Old Owlet. "Doesn't he say in the message that the game progresses satisfactorily if a little slow? Well, there'll be something startling in 'Frisco if Mormon Mort fails."

"Do they know that he is a Mormon?"

"Yes, an' right there is where the objection begins. Colonel Bolt may know that 'Utah' has three wives, but for all that he will make Lura the fourth."

"Well I hate Mormons, and you know it, Owlet," exclaimed Romeo. "If it wasn't for the help Mormon Mort has just given us I'd wish him failure. And then, he is trying to beat the man

who has sent a spy to Puzzle Bar, a paid spy at that! So I wish 'Utah' success. I hope he will win the banker's ward, and as he is playing against Colonel Bolt I am interested. Is the girl pretty?"

"She is female perfection! I saw her once an' the image has remained with me. In some respects she very much resembles Madge, our Queen of the Bar."

"Thanks," ejaculated King Romeo showing his teeth. "I take that as a compliment, and well turned it was, too. Now let us come back to this Volcano Van."

"I'm ready to go to him, ready to keep the bonanza secret safe by crushin' him an' sending word to Colonel Bolt that the game has failed."

"The colonel will get it when the proper time arrives," answered Romeo. "I would like to see this man."

"Before I arrest him?"

"Yes."

"Get ready, then, we'll go down to the Golden Fleece."

The bronze master of Puzzle Bar had but little preparation to make. He had but to strap on a belt which held two silver-mounted revolvers, and having done this he announced himself ready for departure.

The two men left the cabin together and walked with eager strides toward the Golden Fleece where Owlet had lately left the bonanza spy entertained by Nantez and guarded by his three satellites.

"Nantez is holdin' him yet, cap'n!" exclaimed a voice at Owlet's side as he led King Romeo up to the window for the purpose of giving him a view of the interior of the Golden Fleece at that time.

The three watchers now came into view, and Owlet had but to look through the window to confirm the words just spoken.

Apparently Volcano Van had not stirred since Owlet's parting look. He was leaning carelessly over the counter, and appeared to be deeply interested in the story the barkeeper was spinning with a rattling tongue.

Nantez was gossiping; he had a fund of narrative and anecdote that was inexhaustible, and he drew from it in a manner which was quite entertaining. Volcano Van was not the first man he had held for the sleuth-hound of Puzzle Bar. Another who had been sent out on the same mission in which he had enlisted owed his failure and his doom to the glib tongue of Nantez.

"Thar's your man," whispered Old Owlet at King Romeo's ear as the master of the bonanza camp leaned forward with his eyes already riveted upon the 'Frisco sport. "If you want a closer view, you'll have to go inside."

Romeo made no reply.

He stood near the window, his face almost against the single pane, and with a strange snap to his eyes.

Volcano Van stood in full view; while he leaned on the counter the perfection of his figure could not escape, and Romeo seemed to see that the man who had come to Puzzler Bar on a mission of destruction was no ordinary foe.

"Shall we go in, captain?" asked Owlet, a little impatient.

His voice seemed to rouse Rough Romeo; he started and drew back.

"I guess not," he slowly responded.

"Ah! you've seen enough of Colonel Bolt's man."

"I don't want to get a closer view just now," was the candid assurance.

A natural question came to Owlet's lips, but he held it back.

"His glance at Romeo told what it was."

The master of Puzzle Bar had seen the new enemy somewhere; there could be no other reason for him declining to meet him face to face.

"I'd rather you'd not disturb him to-night," Romeo added.

Old Owlet showed no astonishment.

"Just as you say, captain. I'm always under orders, you know," he answered. "Say the word an' we'll break Nantez's narrative like a stick."

"Let him be. I only wanted to see him, that is all," and Romeo looked through the window again. "I know that he is Colonel Bolt's detective, for you have said so, Owlet, and that is enough. I promise you that I shall not let the fellow have any string here, for a more dangerous man, more dangerous to our interests, I mean, then he never entered Puzzle Bar! You can watch him to-night, I leave the details to you, but I want no arrest made. Time enough yet. One man can't beat us in a few hours."

Rough Romeo drew back with no intention of entering the Golden Fleece.

"Keep your eye on the nabob's agent," he said, with a parting look at Old Owlet. "Report to me to-morrow."

The four men touched their hats to the master of the gold-camp as he moved off, and the eagle eye of Owlet followed his figure until it was lost.

"I'll go inside an' help Nantez entertain the 'Frisco fly," remarked the watch-dog to his men. "You fellows can disperse if you like. I'll tend to the man in thar."

There was a separation as Old Owlet turned

to the door, and the three lingered long enough to see him walk toward Volcano Van.

Meantime King Romeo had gone back to his shanty. Closing the door behind him, he threw himself upon a stool and struck the table with his fist.

"Why couldn't Colonel Bolt have sent another man?" he cried. "Why that man when there are thousands in 'Frisco? Gray Gid or Gideon Galt recommended him! In the arch fiend's name, why didn't Gideon select some one else?"

There was no answer to these interrogatives which followed each other in quick succession from Romeo's mouth.

Any listener could have heard them, but there was no eavesdropper plying his sneaking vocation.

King Romeo had changed color; there was an expression of mingled fear and doubt in his eyes.

All at once he sprung up and rushed from the cabin like a wild man.

"I'll get Gold Grip to look at the man," parted his lips as he dashed through the starlight.

A few strides carried Romeo to a cabin like his own, but no light was visible beyond the window. This did not deter him.

In a moment he had opened the door and was inside.

"Who is it?" demanded a voice, and the dim figure of a man rose from a cot against the rough logs.

"It is I, Romeo," responded the head tough of Puzzle Bar. "Have you seen the man?"

"What man?"

"No, you have not! Go at once to the Golden Fleece and study the fellow Nantez is lying to over the bar. Go quick; he may be gone!"

In a minute a man, stalwart and darkly handsome like Romeo, was on his feet. He was wide awake, and his eyes were full of amazement and eagerness.

"Go! I will wait here for your report," and the hand of Rough Romeo pushed Gold Grip toward the door. "Don't disturb the man, but study him from the window. Owlet has got him in hand. Now be off."

Hardly knowing whether Romeo was sane or mad, Gold Grip left the cabin, and the master of Puzzle Bar began to wait impatiently for his return.

"Won't he open his eyes when he sees him?" he ejaculated. "It'll startle him as it did me, and no wonder."

Gold Grip was not gone more than ten minutes, though the time seemed that many hours to the man in his cabin. All at once the door opened and he burst in.

Romeo sprung up with an eager question on his lips.

There was a deep flash in Gold Grip's eye.

"Well, I saw him," began Gold Grip. "Whar did he come from?"

"From our old enemy, the 'Frisco banker."

"A spy?"

"A sworn agent, which means that he will discover the bonanza secret, beat Owlet and all of us, if he can."

The two men kept silence for a time. King Romeo was waiting for Gold Grip to speak.

"I've made up my mind about him," suddenly said Gold Grip.

"Well?"

"I won't lift my hand ag'in' 'im, so help me Heaven!"

Rough Romeo started and drew back with his eyes fastened on his pard.

"He may ruin us," he said at last.

"I can't help it."

"He comes from the most persistent enemy the bonanza ever had, Colonel Bolt, whose past life before he became a 'Frisco banker is well known to us. If Volcano Van succeeds, we go under."

Gold Grip bowed.

"You don't want to lose the stake now?" continued Romeo, watching the silent man like a hawk.

"No."

"But you say that you won't lift a hand against the man who has come to crush us for another."

"I won't."

Romeo bit his lips.

"Then I'll let Owlet do all the work."

Gold Grip looked up with a start.

"Then I'll kill Owlet!" was his fierce rejoinder.

CHAPTER VII.

A REAL SENSATION.

It was a strange state of affairs; Puzzle Bar had never seen anything like it.

The two men in the light of Gold Grip's lamp had some traces of similarity in looks and figure. They might have been brothers; but nobody knew them as such in the mountain camp.

Rough Romeo was the older of the two, that was evident, but he had not seen more tough life than Gold Grip.

"Good-night," suddenly exclaimed Romeo, with a glance at his companion. "I guess we'll let this puzzle work itself out."

"What puzzle?"

"I don't mean puzzle," answered Romeo, with

a slight smile. "I mean that we'll let the mysterious spy have things his own way."

"Not that!" cried Gold Grip. "I will see that the bonanza secret remains safe."

There was no answer, and the retreating footsteps of King Romeo left Gold Grip to himself once more.

"I don't like it that he had to turn up just now and in the role of a spy for Butler Bolt," came from his lips in audible tones. "I can't enter the league against him; that is, I can't sign Volcano Van's death-warrant, and without my signature, by heavens! he shall not be condemned!"

Gold Grip picked up the slouch hat that lay on the table, and went out.

"Still open, and he is still thar!" he muttered, seeing the lighted window of the Golden Fleece. "If he's a man to take advice he shall get the best he ever heard."

A moment later the pard of Puzzle Bar was walking rapidly toward Nantez's saloon, and in a little while he stood there once more.

But Volcano Van was gone, and Nantez was about to close his trap for the night.

"I'll strike the trail. I want to know if he went away watched by Owlet," And Gold Grip walked in, much to the astonishment of the only occupant of the place.

An inquiry drew from Nantez the very information wanted.

Volcano Van had gone away in company with the watch-dog of Puzzle Bar, who had offered him a cot for the night.

Gold Grip started slightly at this information, yet had a faint smile for Old Owlet's low cunning.

"Once in that sleuth-bound's sight, always thar," muttered Gold Grip, and he walked out, leaving Nantez in a certain state bordering on bewilderment.

"What's up now?" suddenly exclaimed a voice and Gold Grip turned to behold Nevada Nat.

"Shall I tell Nat about the spy?" passed through the god pard's mind. "Pshaw! he must know that he is here."

"You walk like you're on the turf!" continued King Romeo's rival, drawing near to Gold Grip. "Puzzle Bar's got a new citizen an' Owlet, like a good Samaritan, has taken him in."

Gold Grip thought there was a latent flash in the depths of the speaker's eyes as if he too had fathomed Owlet's cunning, but he did not make known his discovery.

"Have you seen the visitor?" he asked.

"Yes, got a glimpse of him at the Golden Fleece," answered Nat. "He's hyer on business though he is said to be going to Salt Lake."

"When?"

"Oh, circumstances will determine that. They will determine it pretty soon, too, if Owlet suspects."

"Don't you think he suspects already?"

"Yes."

"What do you think? Go on."

Gold Grip leaned forward to catch Nevada Nat's expression in the starlight. He was burning with eagerness.

"Why, the man's an agent. You know what that means," was the answer.

"I see you know it," returned Gold Grip, and his hand instinctively closed on Nat's arm. "Owlet knows he is."

"Then his doom is sealed. Let the bloodhound of Puzzle Bar have his way."

Gold Grip made no reply, but his hand fell from Nevada Nat's arm.

"You war not going to see the suspect, eh? He's at Owlet's shanty, an' he'll enjoy the sleep he gets!"

"To-morrow is settlement day," Nat went on. "An' I presume the lion's share will fall in the usual place."

"Why should it not?" asked Gold Grip.

"Why should it?" was the quick response, and now there was an undoubted flash in the speaker's eyes.

"Because we owe the bonanza to King Romeo. He was the finder an' the guide. Without him we might be paupers to-night, whereas, we are bonanza kings."

"Fudge!" cried Nat. "We must give him all the credit; we must throw the lion's share once a year at his feet, an' give ourselves no credit for what we ar'!"

Gold Grip could not but stare at the man who spoke thus.

What had passed between King Romeo and Nevada Nat that the latter should use this language?

The consent of Madge to be the master's wife was unknown to Gold Grip, though he might have known that such an event was not one of the improbabilities of life at Puzzle Bar.

Nevada Nat was the last man to play rebel. Why, he was one of the chiefs of the Banded Seven!

"Mebbe you don't catch on," he suddenly resumed, seeing Gold Grip's inquisitive stare. "Well, between you an' I, I'm tired of several things."

"The world's afore you, Nevada, an' it's no little world either. Something's been going wrong. I kin see that now."

"You do, eh?" came through Nat's teeth. "I'm glad you see something at last. I'm going off."

"From Puzzle Bar?"

"Yes."

"But not till after the annual divide?"

"To-morrow, an' afore that event! I don't want a dollar o' what his so-called genius has won for us. Thar's too much one-man power hyer for me. By Jove! they talk o' scorpions comin' up from 'Frisco; why, we've had one hyer ever since thar's been a shanty at the Bar. Let him take the woman he's won, but I'll bet my head that it'll be a short honeymoon."

"What's that?"

Nevada Nat burst into a laugh.

"Mebbe I'd better not go off the handle, I'm a man, an' no little affair o' the heart shall break me up."

"Ha! a love affair. I see!" ejaculated Gold Grip. "I thought you war past that stage, Nevada?"

"A man o' sense never passes it. Thar's some traps that'll catch the oldest fox, but you're the first man to know that Madge o' Puzzle Bar caught two men at once."

"Two men?"

"Me an' King Romeo! It hasn't been three hours since she promised to become his wife. I told him to look out for scorpions, and he should. He's liable to be stung, stung in a manner that'll give Puzzle Bar new no oriety. By Jove! I hate 'im, an' who wouldn't, standin' in my shoes? But don't repeat this, Gold Grip. Let me say good-by, good-by to Puzzle Bar. To-morrow the lion will take his share as usual, that is, if to-morrow ever comes to him!"

Nevada Nat took Gold Grip's hand impulsively, squeezed it for a moment, then passed on.

He was out of sight in a moment, and Gold Grip was left standing on the scene of the *rencontre* like a man suddenly roused from a trance.

"Wonders on wonders!" murmured the Puzzle Bar pard. "Romeo and Nat rivals for Madge? I wonder if thar's any others? I'm all tore to pieces. Whar war I going when I met the mad man? To see the spy from 'Frisco, but I'm in no mood to meet him now. Let it go till to-morrow. Old Owlet will do nothing to-night. He has the man in his net, and will keep him there for a time. Although Volcano Van is Colonel Bolt's agent, he is just as safe under Owlet's roof to-night as he would be under mine," and Gold Grip turned abruptly and went back to his own shanty.

There was something new for him to think about, and, long after he extinguished the light, he lay awake on his cot, dwelling on the two events that had just startled him—Volcano Van's arrival at Puzzle Bar and Madge's engagement to King Romeo.

Not long afterward the gold-camp near the Utah line grew as still as death. Here and there a dim light shone beyond a cabin window, but nobody seemed to be abroad.

It was under these circumstances that Gold Grip fell asleep at last, and did not awake until the light of a new day had come.

Owlet's cabin was within sight of his own door, and as he opened it to look out he started back with a light cry.

"He is still safel!" he cried, fixing his eyes on the man who stood in Old Owlet's door with the bright daylight full in his face. "By Jupiter! I told 'em last night that I'll never lift my hand ag'in' 'im, spy though he is, an' I'll keep my determination to the letter. Don't I know whose blood is in his veins, an' doesn't Romeo know it, too? They might turn me ag'in' the world; but ag'in' that man—ag'in' Volcano Van—never!"

The presence of the 'Frisco sport in Owlet's door was proof that the watch-dog of Puzzle Bar had worked no evil during the night.

As Gold Grip watched him he withdrew into the cabin, and the door swung shut.

Thirty minutes later a man rushed out of King Romeo's cabin and uttered a cry that penetrated every cabin in the gold-camp.

In an instant he was the central figure of an excited group.

"Go an' see for yerselves!" he cried, pointing toward the shanty he had just left. "Go an' see the work of murder. Warn't thar a new man in camp last night? Fly to King Romeo's shanty! If you don't see a sight that'll stir you thar, you kin hang Paul Pottoff without a jury."

Needless to say, before the man finished there was a wild rush to Rough Romeo's cabin.

Men almost tumbled over one another in their eagerness to get there first; there was a crush at the door.

The sight that met them was well calculated to make them recoil.

On the floor at the edge of his cot lay the body of Romeo.

The face was white, the eyes had a terrible stare, and the lips were apart.

In the left breast, and just above the heart, stuck the instrument that had done the work—a dagger with an iron handle with a silvered top.

All at once a man dropped beside the body and bent over it.

It was Old Owlet.

"Stand back!" he cried to the crowd. "Thar's a spark o' life left in the captain."

CHAPTER VIII.
OMENS OF DOOM.

The attempt at murder, if murder had not actually been committed, went like an electric bolt through the Nevada camp.

Among those who had rushed to King Romeo's cabin at the first alarm was Gold Grip. He was there when the bonanza's sleuth bent over the body on the floor, and made the discovery that a spark of life still remained.

"Stand back and give Owlet a chance with the chief!" exclaimed Gold Grip, pushing the crowd back as he faced it. "The man who did this shall not escape; you can bet your lives on that."

The temper of the dark men of Puzzle Bar was shown in their answers, deeply grated curses and threats of the direst vengeance.

Old Owlet already had borne the body back upon the cot, and the dagger had been withdrawn and laid away.

All at once the eyes of Gold Grip encountered those of Nevada Nat who formed one of the crowd.

A strange look passed between the two men, and it was evident that Nat's last words had flashed through Gold Grip's mind.

"To-morrow the lion will take his share as usual, that is, if to-morrow ever comes to him!"

Those words spoken in a moment of passion and by a beaten rival were ominous in the light of what had happened since.

Did Nevada Nat think of them as he exchanged looks with Gold Grip?

Without a word the two men met on the outside of the crowd.

Nat was the first to speak.

"Well, the lion won't get his share," he remarked, looking into Gold Grip's face.

There was something like a tinge of victory in the sport's tones, but Gold Grip could not determine whether it was real triumph.

"The hand that did it will be found out!" he answered.

"The assassin cannot escape the avengers of Puzzle Bar."

Just then some one mentioned "the man from 'Frisco," and the next moment the expression was on a dozen tongues.

"Hyer comes Madge! I guess she's got a right inside!"

The following moment the only woman in the camp came up with a white face, and caught Gold Grip's glance with an appealing look. She did not seem to see Nevada Nat, the rejected.

"How bad is it?" she asked.

"Bad enough, girl," was the reply.

"Can I go in?" And before any one could grant permission she crossed the threshold of Romeo's hut.

After awhile Nevada Nat turned and walked toward his own cabin, followed all the way by the keen and half-accusing eyes of Gold Grip.

When Old Owlet came out he was immediately surrounded.

The man knew a little something of everything, surgery included, and his opinion was awaited with breathless impatience.

"Out with it, Owlet. Give us the facts as they stand. What ar' his chances?" cried the crowd.

"His chances ar' one in a thousand," answered the bonanza sleuth.

"That's almighty slim!" returned a tall man.

"It's so slim that I guess we kin begin on the hound what did it."

Owlet threw the man a look.

"On what hound, Rube Rocket?"

"On ther one who came in from 'Frisco."

The answer was applauded, for more than one-half of the crowd shared Rube's belief.

"We don't intend to jump at conclusions," answered Owlet. "Mebbe he's got away already. Look at my shanty. The man speaks for himself."

The crowd looked toward Owlet's cabin, which was visible from the spot, and saw a man who had just come forth. Those who had seen Volcano Van recognized him.

"What does Romeo say?" asked Gold Grip, and the question brought the toughs back to the wounded man.

"He knows nothing. He was struck when asleep."

"Like a coward! The murderer didn't even warn him as a rattlesnake would have done. We've got to have somebody's blood for this!"

"An' somebody's you're likely to get," replied Owlet, as he turned back into the shanty where he had left Madge with the man who had returned to consciousness.

The girl saw Owlet enter and leaned toward him, and silently pressed his hand.

"I wish you'd go back now," whispered the mountain sleuth.

Madge got up and threw an anxious glance toward King Romeo.

"I want you to do your duty," she adjured to Owlet. "No matter who did this, I want him to pay for it!"

"Never fear! pay for it he shall!" was the answer, and the girl went out.

The crowd, or the major part of it, still lingered in the sunlight beyond the cabin door. Gold Grip was gone; he had walked off alone toward his own cabin.

When Madge appeared the men stepped back and a few touched their hats respectfully.

"Thar goes ther only seraph Puzzle Bar will ever see!" blurted a big fellow who had touched his hat.

"An' the cap'n in the cabin knows it as well as you," another added.

Madge was soon hid by the log structures, and the gaze of the men could not follow her.

Instead of going direct to her own cabin she turned aside and lifted the wooden latch of a door which opened instantly.

A man inside sprang up from a table at sight of her; he changed color as the young girl saw—

For a moment the parties stood face to face and speechless. It was look for look.

"Well," suddenly spoke Madge, "the scorpion got his sting. What a good prophet you are!"

At first a flash lit up the man's eyes, but it suddenly cooled.

He took a step forward.

"I didn't intend to play prophet!" he retorted.

"But you have seen what has happened."

"I have seen where the coward of Puzzle Bar made his murderous mark. This is what he did because I did not choose him."

"Yes."

"Couldn't you have gone away, Nevada Nat?"

The next instant the man's hand was at the girl's wrist, holding it as it were in a grip of steel.

"What do you mean? Great God! you don't think this is my work, eh?"

He leaned forward until his face almost touched hers, and she drew back the length of his arm.

"Tell me that you were not out last night," she cried, looking into his eyes! "Stand there, Nevada Nat, and say in presence of your Maker that you were not near King Romeo's cabin between twelve and one."

Nevada Nat looked like a person struck dumb, but by a great effort he got control of himself.

"I deny nothing," he replied. "I was abroad last night. It may have been between twelve and one; I do not pretend to know. But somebody else was out."

"Who?"

"The person who gave Romeo the dagger."

"That is true!"

"The case is in Old Owlet's hands. Puzzle Bar stands ready to hang the man at whom he points his finger. I do not intend to stand idle and see the murderer escape. Owlet will ask me what I know, for, by a certain remark, which I dropped awhile ago, he knows that I saw something last night. I heard something, too. Who was it said, 'To-morrow the lion will take his share, if to-morrow ever comes to him?'"

The words went through Nevada Nat with a thrill that relaxed his grip on Madge's wrist.

"You played listener, too, I see!" he cried.

"I admit that I used those words."

"The 'lion' was Romeo?"

"Yes."

"And you cursed him to Gold Grip?"

"I did."

"Because I chose him instead of Nevada Nat?"

The handsome tough seemed to recoil from the brilliant eyes of the girl before him.

"The work was *not* mine!" he cried. "This hand, though it has done some pretty tough work, never struck a rival in the dark. It is not the hand of an assassin!"

"You'll have a chance to prove it. This mystery shall be cleared up and the right man found. The hand that struck King Romeo struck me. No innocent man shall answer for this crime if I can prevent. Hark! What is that?"

The noise that had startled Madge was a lot of loud voices, and when she opened the door she looked once and turned and threw a look into Nat's face.

"They are crowding against Owlet's cabin!" she exclaimed. "Hear them! 'Hang him! Up with the 'Frisco assassin! What do you say now, Nevada?"

"They think they have found the right man. They are going to swing the man who came in from the coast."

"Who is he?"

"Volcano Van. But look! the pards can't get into the shanty, because Old Owlet has planted himself before them. I believe I'll go down to the scene."

"Go!" cried Madge stepping back and eying him. "May be you'd better tell the mob that you were out late last night, that you prophesied that no morning would come for King Romeo, that you were even at his cabin door—"

"Woman, in God's name, why this sudden transition from friendship to hatred?" he cried.

"I don't want the innocent to suffer," was the answer.

"Nor do I! But you shall know now that Volcano Van, Colonel Bolt's bonanza spy, was also out last night, that he eluded the watchdogs of Puzzle Bar, and that he was within striking distance of King Romeo. Put me on the witness stand if you please. Ha! I see I have astonished you. Well, I thought I could!"

The next minute Nevada Nat had left Madge

in the cabin and was hurrying toward the crowd congregated in front of Old Owlet's door.

Directly before the door was a cleared space, and in the middle of it stood the Nevada watchdog, his figure drawn up to its true stature, and his bronze face calm, while within the cabin, at the little window, stood the 'Frisco sport gazing out upon the ravenous horde who clamored for his blood.

"The man from 'Frisco is my guest," cried the sleuth of Puzzle Bar, and you cannot have him now. There shall be justice done, but it will fall upon the right head. Give me time; I've got a clew, and you know that I have never lost a trail."

The crowd was inclined to draw back.

"What's the proof against the 'Frisco sport?" asked Nat, touching an arm on his right.

"Proof? Enough to hang a dozen men! They've found the dagger sheath in the shanty, an' we all know Old Owlet didn't do it."

CHAPTER IX.

OLD OWLET'S GUEST.

With no little difficulty Owlet persuaded the hot-heads of Puzzle Bar to disperse without attempting to take Volcano Van by force.

He did not tell them that the man was not guilty; he said that the person who had made an attempt on the life of King Romeo should be handed over to them for vengeance in the due course of time. After this the Nevada pards drew back, and the sleepless sleuth turned to the man who had heard the colloquy without betraying any emotion.

On the rough table at his right hand lay the object which had drawn the men to the cabin.

It was a simple black dagger-sheath empty now, as if it had lost its blade.

Old Owlet said nothing, but picked up the sheath and took a dagger from his bosom.

"Do you wonder now that the boys came hyer?" he asked, as he fitted the dagger into the sheath, and held it up to the 'Frisco spy. "This sheath was found here, in this shanty, under the head of your cot!"

Volcano's eyes instantly glistened.

"Who found it?" he asked, quietly.

"Bedrock Burt."

"What sort of a man is he?"

"One o' the most reliable at the bar."

"I never saw the sheath before to-day."

"Nor the dagger?"

"I saw it in your hand for the first time."

"You were out last night."

Old Owlet looked keenly at the young man as he spoke.

The answer was not delayed.

"You are right. I was out."

"You left the shanty about twelve an' came back at one."

"I did."

"You thought I was asleep?"

"Yes."

"You don't know yet that I never sleep," grinned Owlet. "When you left the shanty I was playing weasel. I saw you go out an' come back. It doesn't look very well for a visitor in a strange camp. I suppose you're willin' to give an account o' your movements last night."

"I don't like to be cooped up in a cabin," replied Volcano. "I haven't been used to it for years. I went out to stroll around."

"With no intentions?"

"With no intentions."

"This man is innocent," murmured Owlet.

"He never struck King Romeo. The blow came from another quarter. But, Volcano is a paid spy; he is hyar to discover the bonanza secret, an' to destroy my usefulness at Puzzle Bar. He's got to be tended to for that, but, by Jupiter! they don't swing him for the attempted murder of Romeo. I see that the presence of the dagger sheath under his pillow is a part of the job ag'in' him. He doesn't know that I was at his heels awhile last night. I wasn't gone long from the shanty, but long enough to give the real criminal a chance to play the game he did play."

"I wouldn't advise you to circulate among the boys much to-day," he resumed suddenly to Colonel Bolt's man. "It won't do for you to attempt to leave the Bar either."

"I don't intend to go away with a false charge hanging over me," was the quick answer.

"There ar' men in camp who think the findin' of the sheath hyar evidence conclusive. In their minds it is strong enough to swing twenty men."

"What do you think?"

The question was blunt enough to startle anybody.

"I'll be honest with you," answered Owlet as bluntly. "I think you're not the guilty man."

The sport-detective bowed and held out his hand.

"I like your bluntness," he exclaimed. "If you believed otherwise you would say so."

"You kin bet your head I would. It is my duty to ferret out the man who dealt last night's blow, an' if I thought he was you, I'd say so. I kin guarantee you safety if you'll keep the cabin to-day. The boys won't come back, for I'll see that they cool down. I don't blame Bedrock Burt. He looks upon you as a stranger, and his first thought was to search the shanty."

He didn't put the dagger whar he found it. The man is too honest for that. Nol the assassin is tryin' to throw me off the trail. Give me a chance."

"Is the dagger strange to you?"

"I never saw one like it," replied Owlet. "An' I've been hyer ever since the founding o' Puzzle Bar. Now, keep the cabin rayther close. The boys'll caucus at the Golden Fleece, an' if there be a move made you'll know it in time."

When Volcano Van found himself alone he could not help thinking of the man who had just left.

This was the famous Old Owlet, the sleepless eyed man against whom Colonel Bolt had warned him in San Francisco. It was expected that the watch-dog would be the first one to greet him on his arrival on the battle ground, and sure enough he had been.

But there was something which still puzzled the spy, something as yet unknown to the reader.

It will be recollected that the sealed instructions written by the 'Frisco banker for Volcano Van were stolen from the California library by a masked man who replaced them with a packet similarly sealed.

It was the substituted packet which Colonel Bolt delivered to his agent with verbal instructions that it was not to be opened until he (Volcano Van) was within five miles of Puzzle Bar.

The agent-sport carried out the instructions to the letter, and when he broke the seals and opened the envelope he found, a lot of waste paper!

Volcano was both puzzled and surprised.

What did it mean?

Colonel Bolt had told him that final instructions were in the envelope, but in their stead he found nothing!

"There's a mysterious hand in this!" decided the sport while he stood on the trail which was about to end in the gold-camp, and then his thoughts went back to the outset of his meeting with Gideon Galt and his employment on the hazardous mission.

"I don't suspect Gideon," he cried frankly. "I know him to be eager to discover the bonanza secret and to break up the reign of the Secret Seven. But my Mormon serpent—what of you?"

A smile stole over his face as he thought of Mormon Mort.

"Colonel Bolt suspects the Utah lizard, for, why did he question we so closely in the library? I told him about the Mormon's three wives and he seemed to receive the account with a good deal of surprise, and satisfaction. If Mormon Mort is not playing a shrewd, deep game of some kind, it is because he has suddenly turned saint in reality. I knew old slippery before I saw him in the private office of the Golden Eagle Bank. He started when he saw me, and I guess his mind went back seven years when I headed a committee which gave him ten minutes in which to leave Ranch Number Nine. I half believe this is your work, Mormon Mort. When we heard Lura's shriek in the room below the library and ran down to find her in a faint, which she refused to explain, we were twenty minutes from the room—time enough for some work of this kind.

"Very well; I'll get along without the instructions. I have had my work outlined. I am to find the bonanza, to discover who runs it, to diagram it for my employers, and to outwit or get ahead of Old Owlet—a pretty big job. I am to get twenty thousand dollars if I succeed, nothing if I fail. The last words that fell from Lura Bolt's lips were pleadings with her father to keep me back. She prophesied all manner of evil, followed me to the door against Colonel Bolt's looks, and begged me to throw up the contract. I coolly refused, and the banker took her away and laughed good-by."

These were the circumstances under which Volcano had plunged into the work before him. He was too far from San Francisco, and too near the battle-ground to report the story of the substituted package.

Puzzle Bar with its dangers and desperadoes, with its bonanza and Old Owlet, was just ahead, and, nerved for the task with the chances against him Volcano Van walked into the jaws of death.

Of course he did not know that Mormon Mort had posted Old Owlet about his mission.

If he had known before leaving 'Frisco that the Utah villain was in Old Owlet's pay, the chances are that he would have entered Puzzle Bar unannounced. But there was a man as shrewd in some things as the agent-sport, and that man was Mormon Mort.

He had already made the acquaintance of the Nevada watch-dog, his first night in Puzzle Bar had been passed under his roof.

Did Owlet suspect? Did he dream that the man he was harboring had come to break up the gold-nest in the mountains?

With all his tact and shrewdness was the sleepless sleuth-hound of Puzzle Bar at fault at last?

Volcano Van had not yet seen Caliban, the dwarf. He recollected that he had been instructed to get on the "good side" of the hunchback, but where was he to find the little fellow?

The day wore on with no fresh developments that he heard about the attempted murder.

He kept the cabin as Owlet had suggested, but now and then presented himself at the door.

During these intervals he looked anxiously for Caliban, whom he thought he would know on sight.

The dwarf was not to be seen.

It was near sundown when Old Owlet came back, and Volcano Van gave him a questioning look.

The face of the mountain detective told nothing—it never did.

"What are King Romeo's chances now?" asked Van.

"He's going to worry through it,—but that doesn't lessen the crime in the eyes o' Puzzle Bar," was the response.

After that Owlet was silent.

It was apparent that the sleuth was puzzled. If he had been busy all day he had been rewarded with nothing satisfactory. He looked like a bear ready to growl.

"You want to keep to the shanty to-night," he remarked suddenly to the man furtively studying him. "I can't be hyer all the time to watch you, but, if anything happens, I'll not be far away."

The singular emphasis was enough to rouse Volcano Van's suspicions.

"Remember! you are my guest and my prisoner," Old Owlet went on.

"Your prisoner?"

"Yes. I'll explain later," and out he went among the gathering shades of night.

Day fled and the moonless darkness came.

Old Owlet had the tread and the eyes of the fox.

All at once he appeared at the door of a cabin opened it and went in.

A man looked up from a frugal supper and started at sight of him.

"That's your property!" and Old Owlet threw a sheathed dagger on the tin plate.

CHAPTER X.

THE WHITE FEATHER.

THERE was a moment of silence.

"My property? What do you mean?" cried the man at the table, as his eyes were lifted from the dagger to Old Owlet's face.

"Nothing more than what I've said," was the answer. "You don't think I'd run the wrong man down, eh, Nevada?"

"And you don't suppose I'm the person who used that dagger last night?"

Owlet's eyes were answer enough; his lips did not have to reply.

The person at the table, who was Nevada Nat, picked up the dagger and held it up in the light. He knew that the sleuth of Puzzle Bar was watching him, as indeed he was, and with the keenest pair of eyes in the gold region.

"I don't want what belongs to some one else," he remarked, with a faint smile at his lips. "This weapon was never mine."

Owlet looked as if he expected a denial of this kind; he did not start, but met Nat's look with a twinkle of derision.

"Come, I don't want to make a scene to-night," he ejaculated. "If you want a blunt charge, I will say that I have found the man who used that dagger last night, an' that it is now in his hands."

"For once you are off the scent, Captain Owlet," cried Nevada Nat.

"You deny, then?"

"I do."

Old Owlet rested an elbow on the table, and leaned toward the handsome sport of Puzzle Bar.

"I hardly thought you'd do it when I faced you," he resumed. "There is nothing plainer than my trail. Will you listen a moment?"

"Yes; go on."

"I have picked up a thread here an' there until I have enough to condemn you twice over."

"That is a pleasant outlook."

"The start of the whole thing was jealousy," continued Owlet, taking no notice of Nat's observation. "You an' King Romeo have been rivals for the affections of one and the same woman. You were not the successful man, an' your failure sharpened your teeth an' heated your blood. You threatened Romec in Madge's presence; you prophesied that he would never see to-day—this to Gold Grip. Don't you see where you have made poor plays? Last night you were out; you went to Romeo's cabin, you listened at the door awhile, an' then went in. You remained there perhaps twenty minutes—a longer time than was necessary. When you came out you went toward my shanty, an' from thence back to your own nest."

"Who told you all this?" asked Nevada Nat, who had heard the mountain detective through with a look of startled surprise.

"I picked it up link by link till I have the chain complete," was the reply, accompanied by a smile of triumph.

"The story of my love came from Madge, that is plain," exclaimed Nat, "my hot words against Romeo from Gold Grip; but the other part, my visit to the cabin, where did you pick that up?"

"There were eyes on the alert last night."

"So it seems," cried Nevada Nat through his

teeth. "And they were eyes that used their powers against me! It is true that I was out when you say I was. I went to King Romeo's cabin, but it was not to take his life, though I did not like him. What does he say?"

"He has been unconscious nearly all day."

Nevada Nat looked alarmed.

"Is the man going to die?" he exclaimed.

"He hasn't got a very good grip on life, that's certain."

"Did he say that I called last night?"

"No."

"I called to say 'good-by,' to tell Romeo that I had relinquished all my claims to a share of the big bonanza, and to Queen Madge, too. We parted on good terms, we shook hands over the chasm. By the living God, Owlet, the blood of King Romeo is not on these hands!"

Old Owlet was a man who had never made a mistake when on a human trail. Had he caught the wrong man now? Had his acumen been wasted in the wrong direction, and was he to be forced to acknowledge to the men he served that in the most important hunt of his life he had caught the innocent?

No! the man was not one of this kind.

He had rarely caught a man who had confessed to the charges brought against him, and he had finished the career of several spies who had come to Puzzle Bar for the purpose of finding the bonanza mine.

He was not to be beaten by Nevada Nat's defense.

His strong declaration at the end of his last speech that he was innocent of the attempt on King Romeo's life, did not affect the old watch-dog.

The dagger once more lay on the table, and Owlet's hand suddenly caught it up.

"I am in duty bound to lay my evidence before the camp," he remarked.

"When?"

"As soon as possible, for another life is in danger."

"The life of the man at your cabin!" exclaimed Nat. "You know what brought him to Puzzle Bar."

Old Owlet nodded.

"You stand between him an' the bonanza in a very poor manner. Are you going to give him a chance to get in his work?"

The detective's answer was a smile.

"If I am to be accused before the camp, the sooner the better!" Nevada Nat went on, and pushing his stool back, he rose and stood before Old Owlet. "You don't want your reputation to suffer by the charge that you have caught the wrong man; I can see that, Captain Owlet. You told me once that you would hang the wrong man before you would let a blind trail beat you."

Owlet started.

"When was that?"

"A year ago. I have not forgotten it if it has slipped from your memory. Well, call up the camp, tell the boys that the 'Frisco spy at your cabin is innocent, and that Nevada Nat is the guilty one. Why don't you fly to your victory, Owlet?"

The last words seemed to lift the mountain sleuth to his feet.

"Braggadocio never saves a man when I have tracked him down!" he exclaimed. "When I was sworn into the service of the Banded Seven, King Romeo, speaking for all of you, told me to spare no one when on duty. You have not forgotten this?"

"I have not."

"Then because I have ended my trail at your cabin, you should not growl."

"I will not. Go and proclaim your triumph."

The bronzed hand of the athletic sport pointed toward the door. His lips closed as if he had spoken for the last time.

"God have mercy on you; I'm going to do my duty!" exclaimed the detective. "I never thought to throw you into the clutches of the secret code, Nevada Nat, but fate has done the work, not Old Owlet of Puzzle Bar."

There was no reply; the tall figure of the sport stood erect in the lamplight, with his hand covering the door at Owlet's back.

For a moment longer the old fox looked at him; then, with a sudden flash in his eyes, he turned and walked out with the air of a determined man.

He had taken the dagger with him as if to throw it into the scales at the proper moment.

Nevada Nat heard his last footsteps with impatience.

"He may make the noose, but he will never drop it over my head!" he cried. "He must never fail; that is his motto. When he finds he has captured the wrong man he hangs him, and serves the right one the same trick when he discovers his error. I have told him that the blood of King Romeo is not on my hands; I informed him that I went to Romeo's cabin last night, and that while I said good-by, I wished him a happy life with the woman for whom I would have torn my heart out. I was watched, but I did not know it. Now I see that the circumstances are dead against me. In less than thirty minutes I will be accused of the crime. He will force Madge to tell her story before the crowd, and

the men of Puzzle Bar will know that I loved her and was euchered by King Romeo. Shall I stay for this torture? Shall I go to the rope by the evidence of the woman I have loved and still love? Why not let the thing cool down? Why not give Owlet a chance to put his hand on the guilty man? By Jove! I will. It may look like cowardice; they will post me like a thief throughout Nevada; they will brand me as being all that is infamous. They will call me Nevada Nat, the assassin. Let them! I know that these hands never struck at King Romeo's heart to miss it by a hair. The man who has come from 'Frisco on a secret mission of destruction will give them work enough by and by. Volcano Van, Colonel Bolt's sport-spy, will prove a match for the king watch-dog of Nevada. If Old Owlet wants to save his reputation he had better throttle the agent at once!"

Five minutes later a man left Nevada Nat's shanty, closing the door softly behind him.

He left the lamp burning full on the table and the remains of a supper interrupted lay around the tin plate.

"An exile for a woman's sake," muttered the man as he stepped into the starlight. "It will not be always thus. Maybe if I had gone to her first I would have won; God knows. She can watch him back to life and become a Juliet to Puzzle Bar's Romeo. I wish her happiness, but, by Jove! I cannot like the man who came between with his arts."

The next moment the speaker walked away.

Once he glanced over his left shoulder and caught the gleam of a light in a certain cabin a little ways down the irregular street.

"It's a tussle between life and death thar!" he said under his breath as he looked and kept on.

All at once he turned aside, and walked toward a shanty which contained no light at the time.

"I want to see the scorpion once more!" he ejaculated between his teeth. "I haven't the heart to say good-by to Madge, but by heaven! I'm in the proper mood to give him a parting he'll never forget."

Nevada Nat opened the door without the ceremony of a knock. The interior of the cabin was dark.

"Caliban, my boy?" exclaimed Nat as he leaned over the threshold.

There was a quick response from one of the dark corners, and the next moment the well-known figure of the mountain dwarf was before him.

"I'm going off, Caliban!" continued Nevada Nat.

The dwarf uttered a cry of surprise.

"Before I go I want to leave my compliments with you. You were on my trail last night."

"I?"

"No lies, hunchback! I am going off because the work of your sting has been laid at my door! Now take my parting grip."

The next instant Nevada Nat seized Caliban and lifted him from the floor. One of his velvet hands was at the dwarf's throat, and before the deformed could utter a sound it closed there like a vulture's talons.

The dwarf writhed and struggled in the sport's grip until it tightened like the hand of doom.

"You'll recollect me when you see your hundred years!" laughed Nat in the distorted and blackened face. "You love like a cyclone, my imp of darkness. Aha! good-by, I hope forever!"

He flung the little hunchback through the darkness against the logs and heard him fall on the floor, then, with victory in his eyes, he wheeled and walked away.

Not long afterward he turned his face toward Puzzle Bar from a rock far above the bonanza camp, waved a farewell with his big sombrero and passed again out of sight.

CHAPTER XI.

HOW CALIBAN FARED.

It was not long before it was discovered that Nevada Nat had said good-by to Puzzle Bar.

Old Owlet was surprised when the discovery was made. For once the watch of the bonanza mine had given one of his suspects a little too much string, and when he came back to Nat's cabin with several determined fellows to whom he had told his story he found an empty room awaiting him.

We need not say that the sport's flight fastened Nevada Nat's guilt on Old Owlet's mind. He had in an incredibly short space of time ferreted out the midnight assassin, but had failed to hold him.

During the excitement that reigned in the camp after Nat's flight a miner impelled by some singular curiosity looked into Caliban's shanty.

Seeing nobody he called the dwarf's name and was answered by a groan that drew him inside, and the next moment he was bending over Caliban with a lighted lucifer in his hand.

The deformed lay at the foot of the wall where he had struck it when hurled from Nevada Nat's hands, and his face, still black from the choking, rendered him an object of disgust.

His fiery little eyes shone like live coals as they

looked up into the face of his discoverer. He had come back to consciousness, but it was evident that he had had a tough time of it.

"Somebody has been hyer!" ejaculated the miner.

"The devil was here!" answered Caliban through his teeth.

"Not as bad as that, I guess, though you look like it," was the grinning retort. "Who was he, anyhow?"

"The fiend Nevada Nat!"

The man gave vent to a cry.

"He had to do suthin' afore he left camp. But why should he try to choke the life out o' you?"

Caliban shrunk back like a snail into his shell, but did not speak.

"Did they catch him?" he asked after a brief silence.

"No; he got clear away with the blood o' King Romeo on his skirts."

The dwarf's eyes seemed to get an additional snap.

"They'll hang him for it, won't they?" he smiled.

"Wal, won't they?" was the reply. "You know we've got to get him first, but that's only a question o' time. With Owlet to hunt him down he's got no chance o' ultimate escape. I'll go an' see how they're makin' it with the other one."

"What other one?" asked Caliban as the miner turned away.

"Why, the man who has been at Owlet's."

"Oh, the 'Frisco sport?"

"The man under whose pillow Nevada Nat put the knife after strikin' Romeo. It's all as plain as day now. He thought he'd fix the 'Frisco sport by that neat trick, but Old Owlet ran him down, for all. The 'Frisco sport ain't jes' the kind o' man we want hyer, but jest now Nevada Nat absorbs everything."

"How is King Romeo?"

Caliban tried to ask the question in a tone that would not betray his intense jealousy, and succeeded in a manner that delighted him.

"It is nip an' tuck with King Romeo," answered the man. "Now he's up an' the next moment he's away down."

"What do you think?"

"He's goin' to make a die o' it in the long run," was the answer.

Again Caliban drew back into the shadows for the miner had touched his match to a lamp on the table, and there his eyes sparkled again.

Maybe after all King Romeo would lose the fight for life, and he could still love the woman who had taken by storm the heart in his misshapen body.

Caliban seemed grateful to the man for withdrawing, and when his figure had passed out he sprung to his feet and uttered an exclamation of joy.

One lover dead or nearly so and another outlawed! he exclaimed. "What better could have happened? I did not look for affairs to take this turn, but I accept them, ha, ha! The Dwarf King of Puzzle Bar is in clover and he may yet wear the rose which King Romeo has plucked to his eternal cost."

Caliban was still rejoicing in this strain when a heavy footstep outside caught his ear, and as he turned the door opened to admit Old Owlet.

For once the hired shadow of Puzzle Bar had not tried to muffle his footsteps.

When he saw Caliban he burst into a laugh which made the dwarf frown for he knew that Owlet was laughing over the terrible choking he had received at the hands of Nevada Nat.

"Tell me all about it," exclaimed Owlet. "When was he here? what did he say? when did he leave?"

Caliban seemed to smile at the other's eagerness, but nothing loth, he related the story of his meeting with the second sport of the Bar.

Of course Caliban chose his language as he went along; there were a few things which he left out. He did not tell quite all, yet he told enough to satisfy Owlet.

At the end of his story he put to Owlet the same interrogative he had put to the miner.

"How is King Romeo getting on?"

"Dead, I guess," was the reply.

A thrill startled the dwarf of Puzzle Bar.

"You don't mean that, Owlet," he ejaculated.

"Well, the fight can't last much longer. The blow was a sure one. I left him just a minute ago. Madge is thar, an' she's all tore up, too."

Caliban's lips met.

"What does she think?"

"I can't get her to say. She told me that Nevada was out last night; she gave me the first pointers I got, but now she shakes her head. Caliban, do you know that Nat thought he had a claim on the girl's heart?"

"I know it."

"He thought he had first claim, ha, ha!" laughed the detective. "He didn't know that Madge had given her love to King Romeo. The girl made her own choice, an' because she did, the knife of a jealous skunk had to take his life."

The dwarf seemed to swallow something very uncomfortable, and Owlet did not see that his long-fingered hands closed madly at the epithet.

"Are you going to follow Nat?" suddenly asked Caliban.

"We're not going to let him laugh over his success!" was the reply.

"I thought you would not," cried the dwarf, eying the sleuth.

"If you follow him, Owlet, King Romeo will be avenged."

"I did not say I intend to, but he will not boast of his scheme. Nobody ever escapes Old Owlet of the Sleepless Eye."

"Nobody! I'm glad of that!" echoed the dwarf.

The faint semblance of glee broadened into a smile at his lips when the mountain detective left the hut.

"Better and better!" ejaculated Caliban.

"This is the famous watch-dog known the country over for his keenness. He lets Nevada Nat slip through his fingers like melted butter. Ho! ho! Captain Owlet, you'll have to do better than this or you'll get laughed at for your pains!"

The Puzzle Bar detective walked down to King Romeo's cabin.

Nobody stood before it, and the silence which surrounds a house of death was there. Behind him was the Golden Fleece where he knew the dark-faced and dark-shirted population of the Bar was discussing the most startling events in its history.

Old Owlet drew up to the little window beside the door and looked in.

On a cot under the lamp that penetrated the place with a sick-room light lay the burly figure of King Romeo.

Seated at his side with one of his bronze hands in both of hers, was Nevada Madge the primal cause of the dark tragedy.

The girl's face was already wan and anxious. Her eyes were fixed on the motionless master, and there was in them an expression of tenderness which Old Owlet could see from his station.

"Thar ain't another like her in Nevada," murmured the mountain detective. "That girl is worth her weight in gold, an' worth fightin' for if I'm a judge o' feminine humanity. If I should go in thar an' tell her all I know about King Romeo it wouldn't shake her love one bit. But I'm not goin' to do it. It's the last thing I'd think of. Let Romeo die with the secret of the past untold. I'm not the man to shock that girl with it now."

Old Owlet slowly drew away leaving, Madge alone with the king of the mine. He might have stepped in and inquired about Romeo, but he chose not to disturb the girl at her vigils.

"Now for a little sly play with the dangerous man from 'Frisco!" he ejaculated to himself. "As a matter of course Volcano Van is to pay for his foolhardiness with his life. Colonel Bolt's other two spies did, an' this one is the third an' last. I can let Nevada Nat go till I make a fatal play against the man who has crossed two States for the bonanza secret. Mormon Mort warned me in time, an' I have already got the spy of the 'Frisco league in the meshes of doom."

"Owlet?"

The mention of his name by some one at his heels caused the Puzzle Bar detective to start and turn.

As he executed the latter movement a man stepped forward, and the faces of the two almost touched.

In an instant a look of wonder came into Owlet's eyes.

"When did you come?" he exclaimed. "I thought you were playin' your schemes in 'Frisco? Your letter said you were. Why, you almost beat it ter Puzzle Bar!"

"I know it," was the answer, accompanied by a smile. "I left sooner than I expected. Circumstances made me show my hand before I intended to. I played it for all there was in it, and I guess I won, too!"

"In what way?" asked Old Owlet, eagerly.

"In the first place, let me satisfy myself about a matter in which I am interested," the stranger continued. "The man, Volcano Van—came, eh?"

"Yes."

"And you made short work of him, of course?"

"I intend to."

"What! haven't you played your famous hand yet?" exclaimed the man, drawing back.

"Something else took my attention; something that shook Puzzle Bar to its foundations."

"Then, I'll withdraw till you strike. I don't want Volcano Van to see me here just now."

"Of course not, Mormon Mort. When he saw you last you were in 'Frisco."

"In Colonel Bolt's bank helping to make the plans which I intended should never be carried out. I wouldn't have him see me now for the riches of the bonanza. I had hoped you had struck."

"But I will! Where is the 'Frisco wife, Mort?"

"Not in the Bolt mansion, by a long bow!" laughed the Mormon. "I played a hand that wins, and have astonished all 'Frisco. It was a lone hand and a cool one. Lena Bolt, the beautiful, is on the road to Salt Lake. I have stepped aside to see how you got along with the young California spy and sport."

Old Owlet drew back a little and looked at the man before him.

There was a cunning about the Mormon vil-

lain which his eyes and look threw out for the detective's inspection. Old Owlet could see it all."

"Walk down yonder to the last shanty and don't leave it without my orders," suddenly exclaimed Owlet, pointing down the camp street. "It is true that you don't want Volcano Van to see you here. He is in my shanty, an' I am going to him now. Good-night."

Old Owlet turned away with the last word, leaving Mormon Mort to obey the commands just issued.

CHAPTER XII.

A CRISIS.

"I WOULD like to know what kind of a game Mormon Mort played in 'Frisco, but I'll get the whole story from him by and by," murmured Old Owlet while he walked toward the little house where he expected to find Volcano Van.

He had not turned his head to look after the Mormon sport, but he believed he had gone to the last house on the irregular street, which was a structure just then with no tenant.

Owlet could not imagine how the Mormon plotter had escaped from San Francisco with Colonel Bolt's ward, as he undoubtedly had, for he had just told him that the girl, Lura, was on her way to Salt Lake City.

The truth is that the detective of Puzzle Bar did not give Mormon Mort credit for all the shrewdness he actually possessed. If he had known the Mormon as a few others knew him, he would not have been so stunted with his praise, and Mort would have received his dues.

Old Owlet passed on to his cabin and found Volcano Van rather anxious to receive him.

The lamp on the table showed the agent-sport the face of the gold-camp ferret, and revealed to him the existence of a state of affairs which did not please Owlet.

"Well, you haven't been disturbed?" began Owlet.

"No."

"No visitors?"

A smile came to Volcano Van's lips.

"Oh, yes, I've had a visitor," he answered.

Old Owlet started.

"Who was he?"

"Gold Grip. He has not been gone ten minutes."

"Then he told you—"

"Yes, he said that Nevada Nat has run off and that the chances are against King Romeo."

"Was that all?"

"All of any importance."

Owlet looked at the man as if he doubted the truth of the last answer, but did not dispute it. Suddenly the sound of a voice came into the cabin. The two men exchanged quick glances and listened.

"Hello, Owlet! Owlet!" said the voice.

The watch of Puzzle Bar went to the door.

As he opened it, revealing his figure *en silhouette* before the lamp, the shout was repeated and the detective saw a stalwart man standing in his shirt sleeves a few feet away.

"I guess you're wanted at the Golden Fleece. The boys hev caught a rat, an' they've got him thar for 'dentification."

"What kind of a rat?" asked Owlet.

"One we never saw hyer afore," was the reply. "They want yer down thar ter tell 'em what ter do."

"I'm coming," responded Owlet, drawing back into the cabin, where Volcano Van had heard the colloquy. "The boys have picked up some stranger, an' it's natural, after what has happened, that they should hold him till he's vouched for."

"Certainly; that is right."

"I'll go down an' take a look at him," continued Owlet. "You kin continue ter make yerself at home hyer."

He went out with no further words, and the agent-sport was again alone.

Ten minutes passed.

"Now you must go!" suddenly exclaimed a man, who bounded into the cabin, and presented himself to Volcano Van. "Something has just occurred which tells me you were betrayed for death before you left 'Frisco."

The handsome sport's look was a question.

"Mormon Mort is at the Golden Fleece."

"Mormon Mort?" echoed Van.

"Mormon Mort, an' nobody else! The boys caught him awhile ago, an' but for Owlet's interference they would have swung him from the tree before the saloon as Nevada Nat's accomplice."

Volcano Van stood spell-bound before the excited speaker, who was Gold Grip, the third man of the Secret Seven.

Suddenly his hands shut.

"I'd like to see this Mormon centipede!" he cried.

"You don't want to see him—that is certain!" was the answer. "You want to get away from here at once. I heard enough awhile ago to convince me that the man betrayed you before you started on the trip."

"Why don't you expose me?" asked Volcano Van. "You claim to believe that I am the paid spy of Colonel Bolt, the 'Frisco banker; you say that I have come here for the purpose of discovering the best guarded secret in the world."

You are one of the share-holders in that secret, but yet you want me to get away with my life when you claim that all spies in Puzzle Bar are to be killed. You are a strange man, Gold Grip."

"But I'm no assassin!" exclaimed Gold Grip, drawing back. "I came here awhile ago an' advised you to leave."

"To run off as Nevada Nat has done!"

"He fled for his life; why not you?"

"I am not a murderer!"

"That is true. But with the eyes of Old Owlet on you, you are not safe here. He knows that you are the spy of the 'Frisco banker and his friend Gray Gid. Mormon Mort, who betrayed your coming by a message of some kind, is here himself. Owlet has just rescued him from the hands of the pards of Puzzle Bar. Don't you know what will happen next? Are you foolish enough to think that Owlet ever lets a rat out of the trap on purpose? You don't know the dragon who guards the bonanza secret! Go! go! Before it is too late, turn your back on the deaths of Puzzle Bar. You have no more chance here than a kid has in the tiger's claws."

The sport's lips met.

"I challenge you to tell me why you take such an interest in me," he exclaimed, stepping toward Gold Grip, who was in earnest.

"You want to know, eh?"

"Yes; you dare not tell me, I say."

A mental struggle seemed to be going on with the man before him.

"I don't think we ever met before," the young detective continued. "I certainly did not expect an event of this kind."

"No, of course not," and Gold Grip's hand clutched Van's arm at the wrist. "If you will not go without knowing—"

"I may not go then."

"Well, come with me! I'll show you why I want you to go away. I don't care a curse for the bonanza. I can live without it, but you must go. By heavens! you must!"

The next moment the two men were beyond the cabin, and on the road to the one occupied by the Puzzle Bar sport. There was a wild, almost insane, eagerness about Gold Grip's actions. When he reached his cabin he kicked the door open and led Volcano Van across the threshold.

"Stand there!" he commanded, dropping the hand he had held during the journey, and a moment later he disappeared behind a curtain that hung in one corner.

Volcano Van waited five minutes on the man. When he came out he carried a small, flat package in his hand, and in a moment he had deposited it on the table.

"Where is your mother?" he asked, wheeling suddenly upon Volcano Van.

"My mother? She is dead."

"Ah! when did she die?"

"When I was a boy."

There was no reply for a moment.

"This is a strange place for family secrets," said Gold Grip when he spoke again, and then his hand pointed to the package on the table.

"Open that and inspect the contents," he cried, and then with a revolver in his hand he went and leaned against the wall near the window.

Did he expect an onslaught of some kind? Was he fearful that the abandonment of Old Owlet's cabin had shortened Volcano Van's lease of life?

The 'Frisco spy turned to the pocket and picked it up. It was not larger than his hand, and the outside covering was a piece of dirty buckskin, which was wrapped with a piece of dark cord.

Every now and then Gold Grip threw a glance toward him, but soon returned to his armed vigils at the window.

As the buckskin was removed the gilded frame of a daguerreotype came into view, and at last Volcano Van was gazing into the face of a woman in the prime of life and beautiful.

"My mother!" he exclaimed in a voice that seemed to send a thrill through Gold Grip, for he started.

"Ha! do you think so?" he suddenly laughed, in tones totally unlike his natural ones.

"I know it! That is a face that will never leave my memory while memory lasts!" was the response.

Gold Grip turned suddenly from the window and came toward the 'Frisco sport.

"Yes, Volcano Van, that is your mother," he resumed, and then he took off his sombrero, and holding it respectfully behind him, leaned forward and gazed in silence on the daguerreotype.

"There can be no mistake, but in heaven's name, how came this picture in your possession?" asked Volcano Van, turning to the sport of Puzzle Bar.

"You want to know everyting, I see," was the response. "I have a mind to tell you nothing more, but to ask you, in the name of your mother, to withdraw from this game, and from this death-trap before Old Owlet and his men shut you in forever!"

"That is the game, eh?"

"Yes. The man who went down to the Golden Fleece, where he rescued the traitor Mormon, knows everything, and I know that the highest

authority in Puzzle Bar has issued commands for your doom. You will go now, for *her* sake, won't you? If she were here she'd unite her plea with mine. My God! if I had known that you were to enter this service, I would have met you in 'Frisco."

Volcano Van looked down into Gold Grip's eyes. He could not help it.

"Is that all?" he asked. "Do you want me to play false to Colonel Bolt because your watch-dog has scented me?"

"No, not for that alone!" was the quick answer.

"Then tell me why?"

Gold Grip dashed suddenly to the window, as if a sound had startled him, but the next moment he came back, and caught up the picture.

"I guess the son of that mother has a right to save your life," he exclaimed.

A cry burst from the agent's lips.

"What is that? Are you her son, too?"

"I am the older brother!" And Gold Grip drew back to let the lamplight fall full on his bronze face, lit up by a pair of sparkling eyes. "This is a secret which is shared by but one man in Nevada, an' he is wrestling with death now! I am the son of the woman who brought you into the world. I left home before you were born, but I came back once and saw you in your cradle. You have our mother's features. I knew you on sight. Now, won't you go away? For my sake—"

There was now a noise outside; a hum of voices.

The sport of Puzzle Bar went back to the window and looked out.

Volcano Van saw his lips twitch and his face grow darker than ever.

"Mebbe it is too late, my brother," he exclaimed. "Old Owlet and his dogs have come!"

CHAPTER XIII.

AN OUTBURST OF PASSION.

IN the mean time in another quarter of the camp, and not far away, either, events of another nature were occurring, and justice to the reader requires us to visit them at once.

Nevada Madge had left King Romeo for a hurried trip to her own cabin, and the stout master of Puzzle Bar, still hovering between life and death, was sleeping on the rude bedstead from which he had not stirred since the fatal blow.

If Madge had looked back during her brief journey she might have seen that she was stealthily followed by a dwarfed individual who had a pair of eyes that glowed like coals in a grate.

When the girl had closed the door behind her, her tracker sprung forward and landed at the little window near the portal. He was keenly on the alert, and his brilliant little orbs fairly snapped when they discovered Madge in her own cabin.

The girl went at once to the corner of the structure and unlocked a heavy chest. Diving into it, her hand fished out a small box, which she placed on the table under the lamp. Then she took a chair and opened the box with a good deal of eagerness.

The eyes at the window saw the whole proceeding. They saw Madge take from the box a long neck-chain, to which was attached a locket. The case glittered as the girl held it up in the light, as if to admire it.

All at once she opened the locket and bent over the table.

"What can be in it?" ejaculated the spy at the window, who was none other than Caliban. "I'd give my eyes almost to see. She is looking at a face that I'm mad to get a peep at. Ah! how beautiful she is! No wonder King Romeo played for her when others were dreaming. My adorable creature, the end of the game is not yet. Caliban has not played his winning hand? No, no! Ha, ha!"

Madge had become so absorbed in the locket that she was lost to all else. She seemed to be devouring its contents, and Caliban could see by her color that she was excited.

She did not dream of spies. Who would watch her? All at once Caliban left his position, his long fingers gliding along the logs reached the door—of course his body followed.

In a little while the door of Madge's cabin opened noiselessly. The dwarf stepped inside with the tread of a cat; he saw nothing but the figure of Madge at the table, with her eyes still fastened on the picture, and oblivious to everything else.

In a minute he was leaning over her shoulder; his dark, grotesque face and his burning eyes showed the triumph he had obtained.

Madge was looking at a face in the locket. It was the face of a man in middle life, "full of expression and handsome," as the term goes.

"Ah!" sighed the girl. "Lost forever, I fear," and then she closed the locket with a snap and leaned back.

This was a movement totally unexpected by Caliban. His chin came in contact with Madge's shoulder, and the girl, thrilled by the touch, turned, looked at him, and sprung erect.

"When did you come in?" she cried. "Is this the way you visit people, like a thief or an eavesdropper?"

Caliban swallowed the terms and put on his blandest smile which did not soften his countenance.

"Pardon me, Madge," he replied. "I did not like to disturb you and so I was waiting for you to be at leisure."

The girl seemed to see that the words were intended to hide some cunning.

"But you were at my shoulder," she persisted. "You are very familiar on your visits."

Caliban grinned, nothing daunted, and showed his teeth.

Madge had never had much to do with the dwarf of Puzzle Bar. They had met at times, but only when such meetings were unavoidable; but no familiarity had resulted. There was something about Caliban that could attract nobody, something inexplicable besides his dwarfed figure and basilisk eyes.

Madge had often wondered why King Romeo kept him in camp, but he was permitted to remain and to have a cabin of his own secured to him by a roughly-drawn deed, and signed by the head master himself.

"I am sorry I have angered you," the dwarf suddenly went on. "If you will pardon me, I will never do so again. But I happened to see you come in, and I want to know something about you know whom."

"About Romeo?" cried Madge.

"Yes."

"I have just left him."

"I thought so."

"Romeo is going to live!" cried the girl, with sudden enthusiasm. "They all say not, Owlet, Gold Grip, all of them; but I know better. He is certain to gain a victory over death!"

Caliban could see what pleasure the speaking of these words gave the fair young creature before him.

"It was a close call," he answered.

"The work of a coward!" cried Madge. "The person who went to King Romeo's cabin and dealt that dastardly blow deserves the most extreme penalty mentioned in the code of Puzzle Bar."

"Which is death?"

"Death! was it not murder to all intent?" and Madge leaned toward the dwarf, who seemed to plant himself firmer for her action. "He came in the night, came to take a life, found his victim asleep, and struck!"

Madge seemed forget that she held the locket and chain in her hand. In her excitement she had forgot to put them up.

"They tell me that the man who did it has run away," ejaculated Caliban.

"Nevada Nat has fled!" answered Madge.

"Owlet let him slip through his fingers. Don't you think Owlet is losing his grip?"

"The sleuth of Puzzle Bar is very keen, but for once he has been beaten," she replied. "Do you think Nevada Nat did it?"

"I only know what I hear in this case," shrewdly answered Caliban.

"That is all any of us know. Nobody saw the blow dealt, not even King Romeo who received it. Owlet says that Nat struck to get rid of a rival. What do you think of that, Caliban?"

The hunchback of Puzzle Bar had himself under admirable control. He did not start at the girl's last words as if he had anticipated them.

"A rival, hey?" he exclaimed.

Nevada Madge smiled.

"Nat claimed to love me, Caliban, but he found that some one had been ahead of him."

"King Romeo?"

"Yes," and the girl's face got a sudden glow of pride. "Owlet's theory is, that, unable to win me, Nevada Nat went for Romeo with the dagger."

"And failed!" cried the dwarf.

"Thank heaven, yes."

"I would not have failed, Madge!" suddenly laughed Caliban. "Look! my arm is not as strong as Nevada Nat's, but it wouldn't have made a balk of the play for a pretty creature like you!"

There was a peculiar tone in the hunchback's voice; but the girl did not seem to notice it, nor did she take notice of the compliment paid her in the last sentence.

Suddenly Caliban went forward, and folding his arms on his breast he stopped in front of her and straightened. Then he struck an attitude which in a full grown man would have been imposing, but in Caliban it was grotesqueness.

"What if I should enter the arena Madge, my beauty?" he exclaimed. "Suppose I should take Nevada Nat's place?"

The girl looked at him with astonishment depicted in her eyes.

"What do you mean?" she cried.

"Can't you see?" What if Caliban should enter the contest for a heart? Hasn't he a right to love a pretty woman if he is so inclined?"

"Yes," answered the girl. "There is nothing in the Nevada code—"

"The code be hanged!" broke in the dwarf. "I may be in dead earnest, Madge, and yet you are making fun of me! I have a heart like other people, but you are trifling with it. Caliban may offer you a warmer love than that which was poured out by Nevada Nat and King Romeo. The dwarf of Puzzle Bar is a

giant in more ways than one. The rat of the cabin may be the lion of the camp one of these days. You don't want to listen to me. I see that."

"Go on," said the girl. "I have not tried to check you."

"I will speedily finish, I presume the heart of Caliban would be thrown back at his feet, while the king of the bonanza band holds breath in his body!" sneered the Nevada dwarf. "But he cannot withhold it when he stands in your presence. This is no farce; it is as solemn as the tragedy played the other night. Caliban loves you, Queen Madge. Loves! that does not express the situation. He burns for you: his life is yours, because he lives only for the Queen of the boundless West!"

Nevada Madge seemed to shrink from the blazing eyes of the little man before her.

"You don't want to laugh at Caliban's passion; you can't afford to!" he went on. "The dwarf can enter the lists with the giant. I am no man's subject. I belong to no league. They never forced from Caliban the oath that binds the pards of Puzzle Bar to the Secret Seven! I am as free as the soaring eagle, as dangerous as the rattlesnake! You don't want to make a fool of Caliban!"

The dwarf's look spoke as much as his words. "They intimate that King Romeo has won you? Is it true?"

He wanted to hear the truth from Madge's own lips.

"That is why Nevada Nat struck, they say," was the answer.

Caliban's eyes got a dangerous glint.

"If he dies, what?" he cried.

"If King Romeo fails in his battle with death?"

"We will not talk about that," answered the girl. "I have told you that he is going to win the fight."

"Let us say that he might fail. What then?"

"We will wait till then."

Did the dwarf take hope at these words? His slight smile indicated it. But the next sentence blighted all.

"I shall always remain true to my choice," continued Madge.

"Even if he dies?" ejaculated Caliban throwing his head dwarfed figure forward.

The young girl colored.

"Let this interview come to an end," she cried. "I have to go back to him."

"Back to King Romeo the autocrat of the camp?" hissed Caliban. "You will hear me a little longer!"

"Not to-night," was the firm response.

"Now!"

"Not to-night!" was the repetition, and the eyes of Madge flashed upon Caliban. "I did not seek this meeting. The door is yonder. Go!"

Her outstretched hand leveled at the portal was above the dark malicious face of the gold-camp dwarf, who threw up a clinched hand as he wheeled.

"By the gods! you pay for this!" he cried.

CHAPTER XIV.

OLD OWLET'S SWOOP.

NEVADA MADGE did not answer the snarl with which Caliban chose to withdraw from her presence.

Already she had recalled Nevada Nat's words regarding him.

The handsome sport on the occasion of his declaration of love had intimated that the dwarf had formed an attachment for her, and she had just seen a vivid display of it.

Not wishing to prolong the interview and anxious to go back to the man she had left, Madge returned the locket to the corner chest and followed Caliban into the night.

The venomous dwarf had already disappeared, and Madge did not stop to look for him.

"He says I will pay for this," she ejaculated, thinking of the parting. "What does the toad of Puzzle Bar mean?" and then her hands clinched. "Let him threaten as long as he doesn't act. Caliban must not sink his teeth beneath the skin."

Madge turned and went toward King Romeo's cabin.

"One moment if you please, Madge," said a voice behind her.

The young girl turned and stood waiting for the speaker to come up.

"Well, what is it?" she asked, leaning slightly forward as she recognized the speaker who was Old Owlet.

"You've just had a visitor," continued the Nevada ferret coming up.

"Did you see him?"

"Don't I see everything?" laughed Owlet. "Caliban showed his teeth didn't he?"

"You listened, too!" cried Madge.

"By Jove! I couldn't help it. I was going by when I heard his voice and it stopped me like a shot."

"What do you think?"

"I know that Caliban is a splendid judge of beauty," was the answer.

"Oh, let that pass," exclaimed the girl with a toss of the head. "Did you hear his parting?"

"I guess I heard everything."

"I shall take no notice of his threats."

"Unless he tries to enforce them."

"In that case, Caliban, the toad, may find that I can resent insult."

"You need not lift your hand. Give me a sign, nod your head when you think the dwarf has gone far enough, and I'll check him."

Madge saw a new light spring into being in Old Owlet's eyes. It was to her evidence of bad blood between him and Caliban.

"I don't think I'll ever have occasion to call on you," she answered. "Caliban knows that he cannot afford to antagonize me. I cannot suppress a smile when I think that he thought he could woo me."

"The fool, the idiot!" laughed Owlet. "Madge, whatever happens in Puzzle Bar between now and morning, you don't want to leave the captain."

The girl gave him a quick inquisitive look.

"Something is going to happen?" she exclaimed.

"Something is liable to," was the response. "Remember! nothing draws you from King Romeo!"

"I will not forget."

"Mebbe you'd better be thar now."

"What is the danger?"

"Who said thar was any?" exclaimed Owlet, and then he went on before Madge could answer. "I'm going to keep the secret safe—the bonanza secret, you know."

"Ah! I think of your guest now," and Madge's hand stole swiftly to the ferret's sleeve. "Is he really a spy, Owlet?"

"Dyed in the wool!" came out through Owlet's teeth. "I kin say to you, Madge, that he came hyer charged with the task of finding out all about the bonanza and its owners for the bonanza league of 'Frisco. I've just been down to the Golden Fleece helping an old friend out of a little trouble. Now I kin turn to the 'Frisco spy. Go to king Romeo, Madge, and don't let anything—not even a tumult—take you away!"

Old Owlet did not see fit to tell Madge that the person he had just assisted was Mormon Mort. He pushed the girl away with his last words, and turned toward his cabin without giving her a chance to continue the conversation.

"What is going to happen?" flashed across Madge's mind as she watched the retreating figure of the ferret of Puzzle Bar. "I know of but one startling event that can take place and that is a dash for the man who has come from 'Frisco for a purpose."

As Old Owlet had already disappeared, Madge continued her journey to King Romeo's cabin. At the door with one hand on the latch she stood and listened with her face turned toward the detective's cabin, but the camp in that direction was still enough.

All at once Nevada Madge pushed the door open and walked in. At the same moment Old Owlet emerged from his own shanty with a look of mingled rage and resentment on his face.

He had discovered that the man he had left there had disappeared.

Madge did not see him glide away with eyes that fairly blazed. One man had lately slipped through his fingers. Was another to do the same?

"My office is to watch and to prevent!" grated Old Owlet as his nimble legs carried him over the ground. "There is a light in a cabin up there, and I'll find Volcano Van closeted with a man who declared last night that he would never lift a hand ag'in' him."

It did not take the mountain sleuth long to discover that Volcano Van was in Gold Grip's shanty.

"Just as I expected!" ejaculated Owlet drawing back. "Now let me surprise them both."

Back he went to the Golden Fleece.

The men there had barely recovered from his interference in behalf of the stranger they had caught in camp, and nothing but Old Owlet's asseverations that Mormon Mort was "all right" had prevented a tragic scene.

The Mormon had withdrawn according to orders to the end cabin of the camp, thankful, as well he might be, that Owlet had come between him and the swarthy pards burning to end the blow at King Romeo's life.

"Boys, I have a little real sport for all," exclaimed Owlet addressing the crowd.

A shout went up and Nantez's customers waited eagerly for the next words.

"If we can't catch Nevada Nat at present we can pull the cards on the 'Frisco spy."

"On the man under whose pillow I found the dagger!" cried a big fellow.

"That is the man," was the answer. "While he is guiltless of any attempt on the master's life, he is here to make paupers of you all."

A howl of rage mingled with curses met Old Owlet's words.

"Whar is he? Show us the 'Frisco spy!" arose on the close air of the whisky-den.

"Cool down and don't lose your heads," was the retort. "I want to lead men, not a headless mob. We want this thing done up brown; no slip and no mistake. The 'Frisco agent—Colonel Bolt's man—is at Gold Grip's shanty, and we don't want to rush in upon the third chief of

the bonanza seven like a pack of senseless deputies for Sheriff Lynch."

"We'll show you the coolest heads in Nevada!" cried the men grouped before the detective. "So the agent of destruction is at Gold Grip's, eh?"

"He is thar."

There was a united glance toward the door.

"I've got them down to it now," muttered Owlet. "I guess I kin handle the pards of the Bar."

"Gold Grip isn't to be hurt," he went on to them. "The person of the third captain of the mine is sacred. If he has to be held, do it with gentle hands; but hold him, all the same."

"Is he for the 'Frisco spy?"

"Not for him, but he may counsel delay or something," answered Owlet, cautiously. "We have all got a big place in our hearts for Gold Grip, but we can't let him nor anybody else stand between us and a bonanza spy."

"Not for a minute, Owlet!" was the response.

"Follow me, then."

"What is to be the end?" came from the center of the crowd as it started forward.

"Something for the wind to swing," answered the mountain sleuth.

Led by Old Owlet, the pards of Puzzle Bar, twenty-five in number, poured out of the Golden Fleece and arranged themselves under his leadership in the starlight.

There were no loud words now. Shoulder to shoulder stood the stalwart denizens of the camp in the mountains, ready for the tragic play before them, eager to beat Colonel Bolt of 'Frisco at the expense of a hero's life.

Owlet looked proudly through the crowd and knew that he could depend on every man. He had seen the most of them tried before.

"Forward!" he exclaimed, and the band started for Gold Grip's shanty.

The band preceded the pards of Puzzle Bar to the cabin in question and knew that at that moment it was occupied by Gold Grip and Volcano Van.

The approach of a body of men through the silent starlight could not be expected to be attended with no noise. The main street of Puzzle Bar had no dust to break the sound of mining boots; it was hard, almost like a floor.

In the cabin were the quickest ears in the camp. Gold Grip had watched at the little window while Volcano Van studied the daguerreotype of his mother, but he had left it to make the revelation which had startled the man from 'Frisco.

All at once Gold Grip went back to the window, and then he spoke the words with which we closed a preceding chapter:

"Old Owlet and his dogs have come!"

Volcano Van did not stir, but his hand moved quickly to the belt under his short coat.

He looked at Gold Grip's hand; a revolver was already there.

"They have come for you," suddenly continued Gold Grip. "Old Owlet knows—"

The sentence was never finished, for the door of the cabin was opened, and, as two men caught Gold Grip before he could lift his hand, a dozen sprung across the intervening space at Volcano Van.

CHAPTER XV.

AN ORDER FROM THE KING.

THE agent-sport barely had time to conceal the daguerreotype before the bronze stalwarts of Puzzle Bar were upon him.

Old Owlet was not in the charge; Volcano Van did not know that the mountain sleuth was the master spirit that controlled it.

Instead of retreating to the wall at his back and facing the mob with his six-shooters, Volcano Van let them take him without the shedding of a drop of blood.

There would have been resistance by another man if Gold Grip had not been seized at the onset, and when the 'Frisco detective glanced at the miner he saw regret and anger in his eyes.

In a moment, as it were, Volcano Van's hands were dashed to his sides and held firmly there.

Then for the first time he saw the face of Owlet.

"What is this for?" suddenly rung out the voice of Gold Grip, who at the same moment had caught sight of the camp ferret.

"You ought to know without asking," was the answer. "You know the code of Puzzle Bar. You helped to frame it!"

A shout and a laugh at Gold Grip's expense broke over the lips of a few men, but Owlet stilled them with a look. He had respect for the third master of the mine.

"It means that the ninth article of our code has been violated," continued Owlet.

"Where is the spy?"

"Yonder he stands!" and the finger of the sleuth covered Volcano Van. "When a man comes all the way from 'Frisco to violate the most important article of a code like ours we can't afford to withhold the penalty."

Gold Grip was silent.

"Take him away," said Owlet to the crowd.

"Not a step!" cried Gold Grip, almost breaking from the grasp of his captors. "I forbid it!"

The men looked at Owlet.

Gold Grip was one of the masters of Puzzle Bar; Owlet but the head of its police, its human ferret.

"Take him away!" repeated Old Owlet. "My oath requires me to let nothing stand between me and the welfare of the bonanza. I keep that oath against the powers of earth. Take the 'Frisco spy away!"

The grip of the miners tightened on the young agent-sport. The men were with Owlet, though they did not want to disobey Gold Grip of the Secret Seven.

"There'll be war between us if they do it!" ejaculated Gold Grip, his eyes fixed on Owlet, who, standing at the door, had resumed his composure, which always boded evil to an enemy.

"We'll let the future take care of itself!" he answered, with the semblance of a cynical smile at his lips, and as he stepped out Volcano Van was lifted up and carried bodily from the cabin.

Just beyond the threshold an exuberant miner let slip a shout and more than a dozen others followed in quick succession.

"What is that, Madge?" asked the man who occupied the low bed where Nevada Madge sat with her hands holding his as usual.

The girl went to the door.

Opening it she leaned out and looked down the street. A dark mass was moving toward the little square in front of the Golden Fleece, and Madge knew it was men.

The shouts had grown still as if a sudden command had silenced them, but she could guess that they had come from the lungs of the pards of the Bar.

She went back to King Romeo and told him what she had seen.

"I know what has happened," the sport said. "Owlet has fallen upon the spy from 'Frisco."

"I think so," answered Madge.

"Then, Madge, you must do a little work for me."

"What is it?"

"Summon Gold Grip hither."

The girl started.

She remembered that Owlet had said that on no conditions was she to quit the cabin for the shortest space of time.

She was to keep her station beside King Romeo.

"You will go at once—to his cabin," continued Romeo. "He must be found if he is not there. Go, Madge."

The girl drew back and then remained motionless. She was in a dilemma, between Owlet's advice and King Romeo's commands.

"What is it?" asked the wounded sport looking up into her face. "I'm not going to cash my chips before you can get back," he smiled.

"It is not that."

"Then, why don't you fly? The pards may do something I don't want done."

Madge started forward and bent over him.

"I thought you want all spies punished?" she exclaimed.

"I do; but I want to see Gold Grip."

"I must tell him," murmured the girl.

"I have been commanded to remain here, no matter what happened," she went on.

King Romeo's eyes got a sudden expression of wonder.

"Who issued the orders?" he asked.

"Owlet."

"Hal a trick to keep you off, Madge!" cried the sport.

"Do you think so?"

"Why not? Don't you see that they have fallen upon Volcano Van, the 'Frisco sport? They don't want any woman around while they are holding court near the Golden Fleece. Owlet sees a long ways ahead. I say, go!"

Madge pressed the hand she had taken again and got up.

"I break one promise to obey you!" she cried.

"I'll take the blame," was the answer. "Let Gold Grip come here at once. Nay, he need not come. I will send word by you. Tell him that the man from 'Frisco must not perish to-night; tell him to stand between Old Owlet and the bird he has caught. If Owlet questions the authority, he is to come to me."

The girl looked once more at Rough Romeo and started off.

"Owlet is a shrewd one," ejaculated the dark-faced man, stretched on the cot. "He didn't want Madge to witness his proceedings, for he feared her heart would melt and that thar'd be a scene. But Madge doesn't like spies any more than I do, though this one touches me in a tender spot."

The girl was on her way to Gold Grip's cabin. From toward the square, in the middle of which grew the largest tree in Puzzle Bar, the girl caught the sounds of tumult.

A glance in that direction told her that the door of the Golden Fleece was open and the interior of the saloon illuminated.

She knew, or guessed, that some stern work was about to be done down there.

She had seen the man who had come, had admired his magnificent figure, his handsome face and deep dark eyes.

He did not look much like a spy, nor like the secret tiger he was said to be. But Madge had

had no chance to study him; she had not looked below the surface.

She reached Gold Grip's cabin and was about to burst inside without ceremony when a figure started from the dark logs and her wrist was suddenly gripped.

"What do you want?"

The demand was cold and stern, and Madge, as she drew back affrighted, looked into the besmeared face of a dark-shirted guard.

"You can't go in thar just now," continued the man.

"But I must! I am from Romeo!"

"A message for Gold Grip?"

"Yes."

The man, without releasing her wrist, looked toward the square.

"Not just yet; wait a little," he said.

The girl knew what he meant.

"I am not to wait. It is important," and she raised her voice. "I must see Gold Grip, for King Romeo sends me on important business."

"Madge is out thar!" exclaimed a voice inside, and the girl could not suppress a start for she recognized it.

"Keep your seat, captain," said another voice as if the first speaker had started toward the door. "We'll attend to the queen o' the camp." And the next moment the door opened to let a man slip out.

Madge sprung forward with a cry.

"Ah! it is you, Black Quartz, is it?" she exclaimed. "I am from King Romeo. I came to Gold Grip—"

"With a message?" sternly asked the man, looking down into Madge's face.

"With important words."

Black Quartz like the guard at the door looked down the narrow street.

"You can't keep me out!" exclaimed Madge, and the next instant she darted past the man and threw herself against the cabin door which opened.

She burst into the presence of three men one of whom was Gold Grip under guard as she could see at a glance.

A hand was thrust forward to keep her off, but its mission was rendered fruitless by the girl's impetuosity.

"You are to balk Owlet and his men! The order is from King Romeo!" she cried clutching Gold Grip's arm as she leaned forward, her beautiful eyes aglow. "If he questions the authority he is to come to the master. Be quick!"

Gold Grip looked at his guards and a smile came to his face.

As Madge drew back her eyes fell upon Black Quartz who seemed to laugh at the delivery of a futile command.

"I have orders from Romeo," exclaimed Gold Grip. "They must be obeyed at once. I demand to be released."

"Sorry, but I have other orders, captain," was the answer.

"Can't he go?" rung out the voice of Madge as she stepped back with her face toward the toughs of Puzzle Bar. "Since when has King Romeo lost his crown?"

"He holds it yet, but the welfare of the Bar is at stake to-night."

"You are holding Gold Grip here till Owlet adjourns his merciless court in the square?"

"We are!" spoke the eyes of the big man before the girl.

There was a movement on Madge's part. It was not toward the door, but back to the wall a few feet away.

All at once her hand came up from her side, and the men saw in its grip the polished barrel of her well known revolver.

"Go to your duty!" she exclaimed, with a swift glance at Gold Grip, and then her eyes came back to Black Quartz and his assistants. "The orders of King Romeo are to be obeyed, and by the man he has chosen. Stand back and let Gold Grip pass. Please be quick about it, gentlemen. The most important thing on earth hangs on the orders I have brought."

Gold Grip, already on his feet, waited for the guards to recoil. He made one spring toward the door, and the next moment had vanished!

At that moment a wild shout came into the cabin.

"Well, we held him long enough!" ejaculated Black Quartz. "It is all over!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SECOND TIME.

WAS it all over?

Had the pards of Puzzle Bar dealt with Volcano Van for the crime of entering the camp as Colonel Bolt's agent and spy?

It is our duty to see.

When he was marched from Gold Grip's presence held by the dark hands of the giants of the coolly organized mob, he was at their mercy.

Old Owlet watched him with the eyes of a human hawk. He saw the 'Frisco sport in the hands of men who wanted some kind of a tragedy for the blow which had brought Romeo to the confines of life.

He had satisfied himself that Volcano Van was the right man. The message received from Mormon Mort established the fact of his mission, and the Mormon, then in the last cabin, had added confirmation to his story.

Owlet followed the captors of the 'Frisco sport, but kept partially out of sight.

He smiled to think how he had rendered Gold Grip helpless, and how easily they had caught the man who was to dangle from the tree in front of the Golden Fleece.

A halt was made in the square, and somebody threw a dark lariat over a limb that had done similar service before.

There were to be no preliminaries. The temper displayed on every hand was to do away with a trial of any sort. What was the use of one? Old Owlet vouched for the man being a spy; the sleuth-hound of Nevada never tracked the wrong person; the pards believed that he could not fail.

It happened that Nantez, of the Golden Fleece, had not closed for the night, and the advent of the mob on the square brought him to his door. The light that streamed out, meeting the darkness more than half-way, revealed the scene in front of the saloon. It brought Nantez a lot of very thirsty customers, and in less than a minute one-half of the crowd had rushed into the place to liquor up before they swung the banker's agent.

Old Owlet frowned when he saw this desertion.

What was to be done had to be done quickly, and nobody knew this better than he.

"Gold Grip might manage to escape from Black Quartz," muttered Owlet. "If he does he will be down here, and will be a hard man to manage. I don't want him to come till we've pulled the Californian up, after that he can come and be hanged!"

A moment afterward he went forward to a large man who stood looking at Volcano Van through lashes of the deepest dye.

"What are you waiting on, Hilliard?" asked Owlet.

"On the fools who have raided Nantez's ranch," snapped the man.

"Aren't thar enough o' you hyer?"

"Yes, but the boys won't like it if we proceed without 'em."

"I'll stir 'em out," and Old Owlet slipped around the crowd and dashed into the saloon.

"Go out and let the performance proceed!" he exclaimed, halting before the dozen men who were at the bar. "Don't you know ye'r giving somebody a breathing spell? This is no way to hang a man who has come from 'Frisco to make paupers of you all!"

The mien of Old Owlet as much as his words made more than one man put down his glass.

"Let's finish the job, boys!" called out one of the twelve, as he started toward the door, and in less than a minute he had the whole lot at his heels.

Owlet was satisfied but some time had been lost. While he had faith in the vigilance of Black Quartz and the men who were keeping Gold Grip back by a display of firmness, which the occasion seemed to warrant, he had fears that something might happen to retard the execution.

As the men rushed out of the saloon with a wild hurrah, the effects of Nantez's liquor, Owlet was at their heels.

This was the cry which Madge heard in Gold Grip's saloon, the cry which Black Quartz had taken for an announcement of the completion of the mob's work.

At that time Gold Grip was bounding toward the square. He had heard the shout, and it had thrilled him.

Was he to be too late?

"What have you done?" he ejaculated, clutching the first man he met. "I am here from headquarters."

"The deuce you are!" was the answer, and the pard recoiled when he recognized the third man of the bonanza.

Gold Grip turned away.

At that moment he saw the man who gave a new glitter to his eyes.

"Here! this is to be stopped!" he cried, halting in front of this person.

"Gold Grip! By Jove! the boys let you go, eh?"

"No! I am here against my wishes. Where is the man from 'Frisco? Ah! I see him now! You don't want to push this affair. King Romeo says no."

"When did he say so?"

"Five minutes ago."

The entire crowd had turned upon the two men, and they stood face to face under the tree which was to have been Volcano Van's gallows.

"Is Romeo in delirium again?" asked Owlet, with a cold sneer. "His last orders to me were to spare not the spy from 'Frisco."

"He has just spoken in a different strain."

"Who published the orders?"

"Madge."

Old Owlet was seen to start.

"She brought the command to my cabin."

"Leaving Romeo alone?"

"Yes."

Owlet could not doubt the authenticity of the dispatch.

To grant a stay of proceedings might give his victim more than a breathing spell. The pards of Puzzle Bar might resent it.

The brothers had exchanged glances in the

light streaming from the Golden Fleece. Volcano Van could see the intensity that characterized Gold Grip's action.

"Hold the man yonder!" suddenly ejaculated Owlet, turning upon the men who held the Californian. "I'm going to King Romeo. There is some mistake somewhere. I could go on with the work and receive Romeo's approval when I see him."

The last words were addressed to Gold Grip. "You want to see Romeo first," was the answer.

"I will. And you?"

"I'll wait for you here."

"You won't interfere?"

"I won't touch the man from 'Frisco."

Old Owlet stepped back and threw a parting look into the crowd.

"I fear the boys fooled with Nantez's nectar a little too long," he said to himself, as he turned toward Romeo's shanty. "If he had commenced when we struck the square, the job would be done by this time. Curse their thirsty throats, and Gold Grip's coming!"

As he walked away his eagerness to reach King Romeo seemed to increase.

"The girl disobeyed me!" he ejaculated. "I told her not to quit the captain's cabin under any circumstances, and she promised. Confound it! if she knew what I know, she'd have stayed thar and let the Californian hang!"

It did not take Owlet long to stride over the space between the square and King Romeo's cabin.

He believed he would be able to get a countermand which would send him back to the tree with the life of Volcano Van in his hands. King Romeo was in the shadow of death. He had but to bend over him and say that the bonanza secret was not safe while the Californian lived to get a new order for the lariat.

"Madge!" he suddenly cried, wheeling at the sound of footsteps that struck his ear when but a few feet from the master's shanty.

The girl came up with her eyes fixed upon him.

"Why didn't you keep your promise?" growled Owlet. "You were not to quit him for a moment."

"But the order! Somebody had to carry it."

"You could have made a pretense to."

"No! he was in his right mind. He issued the order clearly. I had to hear and obey."

"Then the consequences be upon your head."

The girl's eyes seemed to light up with fearless pride.

"I accept them," she exclaimed. "I have carried an order which I believe has reprieved a life."

"Not for long," grated Owlet. "The days of the 'Frisco spy are numbered! This is one serpent that does not slip through my fingers. But here we are!"

And the hand of Owlet fell upon King Romeo's latch.

"I left the lamp burning!" cried Madge, as she darted past the mountain detective and preceded him into the cabin.

"It is out now."

At the end of his sentence Owlet struck a match and held it over his head.

The next second a loud and shrill cry pealed from the girl's throat, and she threw herself toward the cot where she had left the prince of Puzzle Bar.

"I knew something would happen if she deserted him," ejaculated the Nevada sleuth. "I can't watch everybody at once so I put her on her guard. What has happened hyer?"

He leaned forward so as to let the flame of his match fall upon the girl and her surroundings.

Madge looked up showing him wild eyes and a pallid face.

"What is it?"

"Can't you see?" she answered, drawing back and showing him the face she had just covered with her own. "The demon who is bent on taking Romeo's life is here yet! Do you think Nevada Nat would come back to strike a second time? I don't!"

Old Owlet saw the wild death-struck face of the king of the secret bonanza.

There was not a sign of life about the man who lay on the tumbled cot.

"Look!" cried Madge, catching up the lamp to which Owlet had touched his match before it expired. "He did not yield without a struggle. The two stools are overturned; the cot clothes are rumpled. I tell you King Romeo fought for his life!"

"Which he need not have done if you had kept your post."

"My God! don't throw any blame on me!" was the response, and Madge recoiled with a horrified countenance. "He sent me away with orders, and you know I would have done anything for him. It happened while I was gone."

"It will never happen again!" flashed Owlet, and the next moment he wheeled and rushed from the cabin leaving Madge to go back to the bonanza sport with wildly throbbing heart.

She was alone on the scene of a second tragedy, and the puff of wind that opened the poorly closed door found her on her knees with a woman's lips glued to those of King Romeo.

CHAPTER XVII.

OWLET CORRECTS A "MISTAKE."

THE light that shone in Old Owlet's eyes when he left the cabin, leaving Madge alone with King Romeo told a good deal. While it did so it also showed that the sleuth-hound of Puzzle Bar was still puzzled over something, and when he found himself in the light, he stopped, as if to collect his thoughts for work.

Was he ready to admit that he had made a mistake; that, after all, Nevada Nat might not be the attempted murderer of Romeo?

It did not seem possible that the sport had come back and watched his opportunity to finish a life.

"By Jove! if I am wrong the boys shall never know it!" ejaculated the mountain detective. "I'm not going to parade the mistake before them. They can hold Volcano Van till I go back. Hilliard will do his duty, and the 'Frisco spy is safe for me where he is at this moment."

A moment later Owlet had started off again, and was walking rapidly down the shanty-lined street.

"Now for the tussle!" he exclaimed, turning suddenly toward a certain cabin. "If the toad is here I'll win one of my silent victories and do a little avenging before I go back to the crowd."

The last word, mentally spoken at the cabin-door, was followed by Owlet's entrance without a knock.

There was no light in the cabin, but the camp ferret soon produced one with a noiseless match.

"The fellow is playing 'possum," grinned Owlet, as he held his little torch over a cot on which lay the well-known figure of Caliban, the dwarf. "Don't I know that he's no more asleep than I am? Here, get up, hunchback!" And Owlet held the flame of the match under the dwarf's nose.

There was a quick start and a cry on Caliban's part, and the following moment he was staring into the face of Owlet.

"I thought I'd break your *deep* slumbers!" laughed the watch-dog. "You were sound asleep, I see, but a foretaste of what is to come opened your peepers. Get up!"

The final words were couched in a tone that might well startle Caliban.

"What has happened, Captain Owlet?" he exclaimed.

"I'll explain by and by. Ah! you have your clothes on. Wal, you won't have to dress."

By this time the dwarf of Puzzle Bar was on his feet.

"You couldn't keep your hands off, could you?" continued Owlet. "I guess the other time I pounced on the wrong man."

A sparkle came to the hunchback's eyes, but a look of well-feigned wonder soon drove it hence.

"You haven't told me what has happened," he remarked. "Here you come and pull me out of a good sleep, Owlet, and I am left to guess why. Aren't you going to enlighten Caliban?"

A sneer of derision was the first response, and the left hand of the Puzzle Bar spotter darted forward and clutched the dwarf.

"You'll hear it all if you'll just curb your impatience!" he cried. "You are going with me now."

Caliban instinctively drew back.

"Come along. I've got the true Owlet grip on you and no man ever broke from it."

The dwarf in the hands of the giant was nothing. He was dragged from the cabin with no preparation, and when he had fully recovered his scattered senses Owlet was hurrying him toward the western confines of the bonanza camp.

Owlet's fingers seemed to sink through Caliban's garments and into his flesh, and whenever the dwarf glanced up into his face, he encountered a pair of cold eyes that did not possess a gleam of mercy.

Did Caliban know why he was being subjected to this strange treatment by the sleuth of the bonanza band? Could he not guess to what fate he was being hurried by the rapid strides of Owlet through the starlight?

Not a word was spoken during the singular journey. Owlet avoided the crowd left on the square by darting between the cabins and striding on with but a swift glance toward the Golden Fleece.

At last the twain reached the limits of the camp. The last cabin was behind them and before, dark and gigantic against the stars, rose the gold-ribbed mountains of the Nevada range.

"What have you got to say?" suddenly demanded Owlet of the little body he had carried and dragged from the cabin.

"About what?" asked Caliban in a strong voice which seemed to lack all elements of fear.

"See hyer! I want no falsehoods!" was the response. "I have just come from King Romeo's cabin."

Caliban did not start, although the eyes that looked down into his were dark and full of accusation.

"What of King Romeo?" he asked.

"You ought to know. You were there awhile ago."

"Caliban?"

"Caliban, the little assassin who told Madge that she would pay for laughing at his love-

making! It was your second attempt, eh, Caliban?"

The dwarf, stoutly held in Old Owlet's clutch, made no reply, but drew back and looked steadily at him.

"Come! You see I make no mistakes. I found something at King Romeo's door that gives you away."

"You found nothing," cried Caliban, in a bluffing tone.

Owlet thrust one hand into his pocket, but seemed disappointed over the result.

"I told you so!" exclaimed the dwarf's eyes.

"I have lost the confounded thing—it was so small!" ejaculated Owlet. "What I found was one-half of a gold ring. Where is your ring, Caliban?"

The dwarf glanced at his left hand, and then his gaze became fixed upon it. A smile broadened on Owlet's face.

"Don't you see I have you?" cried the bonanza watch. "The missing ring, a piece of which I found, tells the whole story of the murder. Say, wasn't it the second time, my crippled scorpion?"

Once more Caliban refused to reply to the question.

"Very well! We'll proceed to punish!" continued Owlet, coldly. "This is one of the cases which I settle myself. I don't like these secret executions, but personal policy sometimes calls for them. Say, Caliban, did you ever suppose you could win the Queen o' the Bar?"

"Mebbe I'll do it yet!" was the answer.

"You?" laughed Owlet. "Why, you'd better be thinking about something else. When I saw Romeo lying on the floor, with the furniture overturned, the truth came to me like a flash. The girl accuses Nevada Nat no longer. Why should she?"

"Does she accuse me?" asked the dwarf, showing his teeth.

"She knows that Nat did not come back. There was always something deep in her heart that kept her from wholly believing Nevada guilty; but you see I can't afford to call him innocent."

"Why not, Owlet?"

"I accused him of it before the pards of Puzzle Bar, and don't you know that I always find the right man?"

A little smile seemed to appear at the corners of the dwarf's mouth.

"Nat can stay exiled with the charge of murder against him," Owlet went on. "I'm not going to expose my mistake by removing the charge. I'm no fool, Caliban. The record I have made is not to be broken. Remember! I always find the right man, and I have found him now."

There was no answer, the eyes of the two men met again, and Owlet suddenly caught Caliban with the other hand and lifted him from the ground.

"Do you ever pray?" came from the detective's lips.

"No, and I will not now, Owlet," was the reply.

Owlet strode forward again. All at once he turned to the right.

"You know where we are, Caliban," he said, looking into the face of the dwarf. "A few steps will bring me to the mouth of the shaft we sunk when we first came to Puzzle Bar. God knows what is at the bottom of it now. I haven't been hyer for five years. You won't say that you aren't guilty, Caliban?"

"You say I am."

"By heavens! I know it! You broke the ring in the tussle with King Romeo. Why did you not miss it till just awhile ago? ha, ha! Come, you don't want to flit down the old shaft with a truth kept back. Be a man, Caliban."

Old Owlet heard human teeth meet firmly after his last words.

"Keep silence then!" he grated.

"Ah! hyer's the pile o' old machinery that marks the location of Fool's Shaft," and the mountain watch-dog stopped among a lot of rotting timbers and laughed in Caliban's face.

At their feet yawned a pit darker than the ground that surrounded it.

Caliban knew what it was.

He remembered how he had gone into its depths years before and while the pards of Puzzle Bar were trying to strike it rich immediately after their coming to the bonanza grounds.

He knew that from the foot of this shaft ran another into the bowels of the earth, and he could recall the oaths of rage and disappointment which followed the discovery that the shafts had been sunk for nothing.

No gold was there!

Caliban had never visited the old shaft after the abandoning, and he little dreamed that he was to go back to it in the merciless grip of the sleuth of the bonanza bar.

"We'll stand on no ceremony, Caliban!" suddenly exclaimed Owlet as he held his deformed captive over the edge of the gaping pit.

"I punish in secret for good reasons. The pards of Puzzle Bar will think that Nevada Nat crept back and completed the work, and when they miss you I'll suggest that you've concluded to hunt other quarters. Don't you see, Caliban? We are going to avenge King Romeo and keep

the bonanza secret safe. Volcano Van hasn't got the ghost of a chance. A thousand Gold Grips can't save him. Oh, I'm master hyer, Caliban. The eye that never sleeps may make a little mistake now and then, but the world at large never finds it out—never, my imp o' the poniard!"

Another step was taken by Owlet, and Caliban shut his teeth. He knew what would follow; there was no escape from it.

A full confession would not save him now.

"Down you go!" ejaculated Owlet. "Carry my compliments to the imps of the Fool's Shaft, and tell 'em that Owlet corrects his mistakes in secret. Good-by, Caliban!"

The next moment an abject human, yet grotesquely shaped, fell from Owlet's hands and disappeared like a ball!

There was no cry; no parting shriek cut the air, nor awoke the birds in their retreats near by.

"One mistake corrected!" ejaculated the Sleepless Eye as he drew back from the shaft. "Now I can return and wrestle with the man from 'Frisco.'"

He kept on until he entered the camp again and turned toward the square.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW.

SOMEHOW, just how can never be explained, a rumor that "something" had happened at King Romeo's had reached the men waiting in front of the Golden Fleece for Owlet's return.

It was first said that the king of the mine had succumbed to the wound received in the dark, the first wound, of course, and more than one fierce look was sent toward Volcano Van still in custody, though Gold Grip stood at his elbow.

Not a man blamed the Californian with King Romeo's death, but the need of a victim since Nevada Nat's escape was felt by all.

In plain terms, Puzzle Bar wanted blood.

As Owlet had not come back, he having "other business" on hand, as we have just seen, several men withdrew from the crowd and started for Romeo's cabin.

Their strides were long and agile, and all at once the foremost, a strapping fellow with a beard like a pard, burst into the place.

He was met by a young girl who sprung up from the floor, and turned a pale and tensely-drawn countenance to him.

It was Nevada Madge.

The entrance of the men was probably the first disturbance since Owlet had left her.

"What is it, Madge?" inquired the leader of the party.

Her reply was to point at the motionless figure on the low cot.

"Dead!" ejaculated all the men, starting forward.

"Almost at the end," answered Madge, and the words seemed to come through her teeth. "A man can't withstand all the strokes of a steel-armed coward!"

A lamp was held over King Romeo, and the men all leaned forward, while Madge stood aloof and eyed the vivid group.

"There's breath hyer!" cried one.

"I said so," was the reply.

"When did he begin to sink?"

"When the assassin delivered the second blow."

"Oh, you don't mean the one the other night?"

"No; I mean the second attempt," and Madge came forward. "Open his shirt and you will understand me."

The men's faces grew dark, and their bronze hands obeyed the girl with a tenderness they did not seem to possess.

It took but a glance to show them that Romeo had been lately attacked, and that by an enemy who was determined to succeed.

There were several gashes near the first which had been bandaged by some rough mountain surgery. The men uttered exclamations of surprise and rage when they saw the work of the assassin.

Then Madge pointed out the evidences of the struggle which had not escaped her eye, and it was plain enough to all.

"Hasn't he spoken since you found him, Madge?" asked one of the pards.

"But once."

"Well, what did he say?"

The girl started.

"I'd rather not tell you now," she said at last.

"Saving it for Owlet, eh? Well, we have no objections to that. Nobody can hide long from him. All the camp must know this. Go and tell the boys on the Square; tell Hilliard. By Jove! the hound who did this may still be within reach."

The men who had accompanied the speaker to the cabin drew back and went away.

Madge came toward the man left behind, and said in low tones as she looked up into his face:

"What did you do with the man from 'Frisco?" she asked.

"Oh, they're holdin' him yet; they're waitin' for Owlet who war summoned to Romeo by Gold Grip. We've got him on the Square

under the tree, and, Madge, if we thought he had any hand in this—"

"He is guiltless of this work. I will answer for him," answered the girl.

"Owlet didn't more'n half believe the orders Gold Grip brought."

"They were genuine. I carried them myself to Gold Grip."

"From King Romeo?"

"Yes."

"Why did he grant the respite?"

"I don't know," and Madge threw a swift look toward the master of the mine. "He didn't choose to tell me why he issued the command, and you know it was not my business to ask."

"Of course not."

"He'll explain when he gets better," continued the girl.

"If he sees fit. Madge, do you believe that King Romeo wants the 'Frisco sport to go scot free?"

The girl shook her head in doubt.

"He didn't say that, did he?" exclaimed the man.

"No."

"He only ordered a stay o' proceedings, eh?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. If it war in Gold Grip's hands, I b'lieve he'd give the fellow a safe passport back to 'Frisco. His actions indicate that, anyhow."

"Why, Dorsey?"

The man who was Dark Dorsey, one of the most prominent of the miners of Puzzle Bar, seemed to be framing his thoughts into suitable expression.

"You need not answer if you don't want to," suddenly continued Madge. "I will let you keep your opinions, Dorsey. But you will tell me one thing, I hope."

"Well?"

"Who is the man Owlet rescued from a possible noose at the Golden Fleece to-night?"

"A fellow whose outward appearance looks like a prayer-book," grinned the miner.

"You were going to hang him weren't you?"

"It might have come to that point. Some of the boys were ready for anything. You see the attack on King Romeo whetted our appetites for vengeance, and as the poor devil happened to be found in camp at a bad time for him, he was tumbled into the Fleece ready for the halter. Jingo! how the fellow begged. He swore by all that was holy to him, and to hear him tell it, he is a saint, that he never shed a drop o' blood, and when he wound up by demanding that word be sent to Owlet we were floored."

"When Owlet came, what?" asked Madge, her face revealing that she was deeply interested.

"Why, the fellow's eyes lit up with hope, and I would have bet that Owlet was going to give him a good send-off, which he did. Owlet seemed surprised to see the man, but he wasn't long tellin' us that he was Mr. Jason Brown, a camp parson who was well known to him. Well, as a matter of course, we let up and the fellow slipped away without asking the crowd to take something."

"Did he leave camp?"

"I presume he's several miles away by this time; looked like he was anxious to git away. Did you see him, Madge?"

"I don't know," answered the girl with a faint smile at her lips. "Was he smooth-faced, with a pair of deep-set eyes that sparkled?"

"That's him!" ejaculated the miner.

"Then I've seen him," replied the girl. "He paid his respects to me before he went away."

"How?"

"I saw a face like his at the window yonder awhile ago," was the reply.

"Confound it! he's a prowler just as I thought he was the first time I saw him!" cried Dark Dorsey. "He left when he saw your eyes on him, didn't he?"

"Yes. I barely got sight of him."

The miner would have made a reply if the door had not opened at this juncture, and the two saw the figure of Old Owlet there.

The detective's eyes still showed the triumph he had just accomplished, and with a glance at Madge and her friend he walked forward and held the lamp over King Romeo.

"Why he beats a cat for living!" the two heard him exclaim as he assumed an erect position again.

"Well, nothing has been lost."

Nevada Madge took a step forward.

"There is hope yet," she ejaculated with a glance at the master sport.

"I'm glad o' that. You beat all the doctors that ever killed a patient!" and Owlet showed his teeth in a grin; then he turned upon Dark Dorsey and went on.

"These are flash times, ain't they? I have just let Gold Grip carry the day."

"In what way?" asked the miner.

"Oh, I let him carry off the man from 'Frisco, the fellow he wanted to help so bad from some reason. But don't think, Dorsey, that Owlet intends to fold his arms and sleep. I know a few things which I will work to the advantage of Puzzle Bar. King Romeo yonder didn't select

me for chief o' police to let the big secret go to 'Frisco in a human breast, to be opened in the private chamber of Butler Bolt, the California Nabob! There is nothing between Gold Grip and me as far as I'm concerned. The man may have a motive for arresting proceedings against Volcano Van, who is now known as Colonel Bolt's agent. He only prolongs the game by getting him out o' the noose to-night. A thousand Gold Grips can't defeat Old Owl's final victory any more than a fly can outweigh a mountain!"

Owlet spoke with that coolness so well known to the denizens of Puzzle Bar.

There was no visible excitement about him now; and Madge when she looked at him admired him for his stern determination.

She knew that the man lived for but one thing—the keeping safe of the bonanza secret which more than one league had tried to discover to its sorrow.

After awhile Dark Dorsey withdrew and left the watch-dog and Madge alone with Romeo.

Time would tell whether the last attack had been successful.

If Romeo died the current of more than one life would be changed.

While Owl bent over him in his cabin, not far away in another hut a man was pleading with Volcano Van to quit the camp without delay.

Need it be said that the pleader was Gold Grip?

CHAPTER XIX.

SOME STARTLING NEWS.

DURING the next two days Puzzle Bar was interested in watching King Romeo's desperate battle for life.

Nobody seemed to take any notice of Volcano Van, who, despite his narrow escape from the noose of a bronze mob, still remained.

Gold Grip, the newly-found brother, seemed to have exhausted his treasury of arguments; Colonel Bolt's agent was one of the determined sort, and he had resolved to do his duty at the risk of life.

The absence of Caliban soon came to be noticed.

This was natural, for a prominent individual like the dwarf could not disappear without remark.

Old Owl, with no outward sign that he knew anything about Caliban's end, said the dwarf had left camp and probably would never return.

If Caliban had fallen to the bottom of the Fool's Shaft—and what was there to prevent?—he had left the game forever.

Meantime Owl had not ceased to watch Volcano Van. He who had marked the Californian from the moment of his coming, was not the person to relinquish the espionage. If Gold Grip had carried his point in cheating the mountain detective in the Square before the Golden Fleece, he had by no means driven Owl from the field.

The detective was shrewd enough. He let the toughs of Puzzle Bar think that the two blows had fallen from Nevada Nat's hand; he even encouraged them in the belief, for he never intended to admit the mistake he had made—a mistake corrected when he threw Caliban into the dark depths of the old shaft.

Mormon Mort kept close to the cabin in which he had taken refuge.

As Volcano Van had the freedom of the camp, though watched like a hawk, it would not do for the Mormon to venture out. Owl did not want a collision between Van and the trailer, and the Mormon, who knew the Californian, was quite willing to avoid any meeting.

"Where is the colonel's daughter?" asked Owl, suddenly, as he confronted Mormon Mort, the third night after his arrival.

"On the road to Salt Lake," was the reply.

"In charge of trusted men?"

"Yes."

"Don't you know that they are after you?"

A smile passed over the Mormon's face.

"I did not expect to get off without some effort being made to capture me," he answered. "Of course Colonel Bolt will put forth every effort, but he can't succeed."

"He has flooded the country with circulars."

"Oh, I can outwit them."

Owl went to one of his pockets and produced a small hand-bill which he handed to Mormon Mort who took it with a derisive smile.

The paper was headed "\$10,000 Reward!" and then proceeded to state that the ward of Colonel Butler Bolt, President of the Gold Eagle Bank in San Francisco, had been abducted by a man known in some quarters as Mormon Mort. A complete description of the Mormon was given, and it was added that the girl, Lura, was supposed to be on the way to Utah where the villain expected to make her mistress of his Mormon household.

"I'm worth something, you see," smiled Mormon Mort as he handed the paper back to Owl. "My dear friend, the colonel, is attached to Lura the beautiful, and considers her return and my apprehension worth ten thousand dollars. But how did this handbill reach Puzzle Bar?"

"Not by accident but by design," was the reply. "A man bought it down from Sirocco. He is paid to distribute them among the camps in these parts. Fortunately he came to me first and I received all the bills he had for the Bar."

"And sent him on?" asked Mormon Mort a little nervous.

"Yes. I would not let him see anybody here."

"You have my thanks, Captain Owl."

"If I had let him have his way, don't you see that the pards of the Bar would have recognized you by this description?"

"Yes."

"I told the messenger that in all probability you did not break for Utah."

"Good. What did he say?"

"He replied that there were rumors in Sirocco that you had passed through that town."

"By Jove! I did!" cried Mormon Mort. "I couldn't help it."

"Where did you leave Lura?"

"She's nearer than you think, Owl," was the answer spoken in a lowered voice. "I realize the danger now, curse the infamous handbills!"

"They're always dangerous," replied Owl. "If Lura is not across the Utah line they will give you trouble."

"She isn't there by a long distance. Her escort is waiting for me, and I have remained here waiting for orders from you."

Old Owl smiled.

"Can you trust your servant?" he asked.

"Can I trust a man who was once tied up by the thumbs and whipped, all by Colonel Bolt's orders?" laughed the Mormon.

"He wasn't 'Colonel Bolt,' then. It was down on the Arizonian frontier, and you know who and what he was, Owl. He's president of the Gold Eagle Bank now just as that handbill says. You may bet your head that I can trust Frijo Frank who was whipped as I have told you. Why, bless you," continued Mormon Mort leaning forward and touching Old Owl's arm, "the girl believes that Colonel Bolt isn't just the man to take care of her. I have thrown out hints enough to poison her mind."

"But not enough to make her believe that she is safer in your hands than under the banker's roof?"

"She'll get there presently," returned the Mormon.

"If your game succeeds."

"What! do you think I'm going to lose?" ejaculated Mormon Mort. "The handbills can't find me, and Colonel Bolt may scatter them over every acre between here and Frisco. I've got the beautiful prize, and by heavens! I shall keep it! I did not go to Frisco and play my cards to lose on the threshold of success. I played two games, you know, and both dangerous ones too. I was your spy at the same time I was scheming for a wife. What would Colonel Bolt and Gray Gid have done had they discovered that I was Old Owl's spy, that I sent word ahead of their agent, that it was I who stole spy's orders, and substituted a package of blank paper in their place? Why, my life wouldn't have been worth the snap of your fingers. I've taken risks, Captain, risks equal to those taken by Volcano Van who, for some reason, is permitted to have his own way at Puzzle Bar."

Old Owl colored, and his eyes got a look of anger.

"I am running that game," he exclaimed.

"And no man wants to interfere."

"I beg pardon; no offense intended," was the quick apology. "You'll not catch me questioning your labors. If you will let me go to-night, I will outwit the 'Frisco banker and land my prize across the border."

"I would like to see the girl."

Mormon Mort started slightly, and tried to analyze the detective's look.

"You can see her if she must be seen."

"When?"

"Within two hours."

"Mebbe you'd not like to have her see me."

"Why not? She doesn't know Owl, the Nevada sleuth."

"Are you certain of that, Mormon Mort?" and Owl leaned forward with a smile. "You seem to forget that I have been to 'Frisco, that I have transacted business with Colonel Bolt. Why, I have even been his guest."

"The deuce you have!" ejaculated the Mormon. "If this is the case, why do you want to see Lura?"

Old Owl was silent for a moment.

"I want to ask the girl one or two questions," he said at length.

"About the colonel?"

"About the colonel, and something else."

"When shall we go?"

"Within ten minutes. Wait for me here."

The next moment Mormon Mort was alone.

"They are after me like a pack of bloodhounds!" he exclaimed, when the door had closed on the figure of the camp watch. "By Jupiter! I am indebted to Owl for taking all the handbills intended for Puzzle Bar, and for dismissing the messenger. A few more miles and I will be safe. Then let Colonel Bolt spend

his money for something he can never accomplish. I suppose he wishes he had Volcano Van to set on my track. The fellow has kept me hounded up ever since I came here. Why doesn't Owl crush him as he has crushed the other spies? Has he lost power here, or has King Romeo, dying where the other beautiful creature is, told him to stay his hand?"

Mormon Mort was eager to get away.

The distribution of the handbills worried him. He knew that Colonel Bolt would scatter them broadcast over Nevada, that every camp near the Utah line would be flooded with them. It was by the merest accident that Puzzle Bar had escaped being posted.

What if some keen eye had discovered, during the past two days, that he was a tenant of the last cabin?

If Volcano Van had seen him, the situation would be more thrilling still.

Minutes seemed hours to the Mormon sport.

Old Owl had probably gone to give orders to his men who were watching the Californian, or to visit Romeo before his departure.

Mormon Mort prepared for flight. He was about to take the gold-camp sluth to Lura, after which he would resume his journey.

There was no light in the cabin.

He and Owl had conversed and looked into each other's faces in the light of the stars.

All at once Mormon Mort heard a footstep on the outside.

He stepped toward the door with an inward ejaculation of joy.

Old Owl had come at last.

The following moment the door opened, and he caught sight of a figure between him and the stars.

A cry burst from his throat as he leaped to the step.

"In God's name what fetches you here?" he cried, sinking his hand into the man's arm. "I told you not to leave her for a moment."

"Well, I'm hyer, you see," was the reply, in insulting tones.

"Where is Lura?"

"She gave me the slip."

Mormon Mort's grip loosened and he fell back, his look a stare, and a cry of deep disappointment on his lips.

"She did it when I expected nothing of the kind," continued the man. "She came this way. I trailed her to within a mile of the camp. There are handbills offering ten thousand for you all along the road. I picked up all I could find—"

"Hang the posters! I'm interested in the girl—in the angel of San Francisco. The next man I hire—"

"See hyer! no fault-finding!" interrupted a stern voice, as a hand fell upon the Mormon's shoulder. "I've done my duty. Say I have not, and, by the eternal! I'll throw you dead to the dogs!"

CHAPTER XX.

ON THE RAGGED EDGE.

THE threat was one which the man who made it looked capable of accomplishing.

He was magnificent in physical proportions, and his black eyes seemed to look Mormon Mort through as he let slip the harsh sentences.

The Mormon did not want to stir him up.

"I can't afford to rile Frijo Frank," thought Mormon Mort. "The girl, Lura, has got away, he says; there is no help for it now. Mebbe the fellow did do his duty. I can't take Owl to her now. I must have some excuse ready by the time he comes up."

Then he looked at the man before him.

"How did you know whar to find me?" he asked, with a smile at the corners of his mouth.

"Oh, I'm up to findin' people," grinned Frijo Frank in return. "In the last cabin, ain't you, or the first, jes' as one looks at it?"

"So you tracked Lura towards Puzzle Bar?"

"Yes. She may have picked up some o' the handbills on the road; I don't know."

"I don't care if she did!" exclaimed Mormon Mort with assumed fearlessness. "Do you think she came to camp?"

"I don't think anything about it. I'm almost certain she did."

The Mormon started.

"Heavens! you send a thrill through me!" he cried. "But one thing is in our favor. They don't know anything about the 'Frisco nabob's handbills."

"They don't, eh?" ejaculated Frijo Frank, astonished. "Why, I thought the messenger was hyer."

"So he was, but he bunched his lot, and dropped them into one hole."

At that moment a stentorian "Yo-ho—o—o!" rung out on the night air, and the two men turned toward the point from whence the shout had come.

It was seen at a glance that there was commotion in front of the Golden Fleece, and a lot of men were rushing from the saloon.

"What's in the wind now?" whispered Frijo Frank.

"Look at the big fellow who has mounted the whisky barrel in front of the trap," replied the Mormon, touching his servant's sleeve. "By the saints! he's got one o' the handbills."

"Shoot me for a Digger if he hasn't! Listen. A thousand to ten that that galoot has lungs like a brass giant."

Mormon Mort was in no humor for listening, but the breathless crowd seen around the man on the barrel, and the attitude of the man himself attracted him.

"Thar goes the colonel's proclamation!" ejaculated Frijo Frank as the big pard started out with a paper held before him in the light of the lamp which had been placed on the outside of the saloon.

For the next three minutes the two men just inside the cabin and the crowd in the Square listened to the reading of Colonel Bolt's handbill. The reader read with no little oratorical effect, and could be followed easily from a distance.

At the end of the bill a dead silence fell over the scene.

There was a smile at Frijo Frank's lips as he waited for the storm.

"That man's been hyer!" suddenly cried a man on the outside of the crowd. "It fits the fellar Owlet rescued, to a dot."

"Did Owlet rescue you, captain?" asked Frank.

"Yes, and from those very rascals out yonder, too," growled the Mormon.

"Then you don't want to tumble back into their hands. I've an idea that Owlet couldn't prevent you from goin' overland to 'Frisco."

Mormon Mort seemed to recoil.

"I don't intend to go back," he replied in a manner that bespoke the desperate man.

"By Jove! I'd rather meet and fight it out with Volcano Van."

"Is he here?"

"He is. Owlet has played with him."

"Where is he?"

"Under Gold Grip's protection. But what are the pards going to do? Our orator has left his barrel."

"And all have gone inside to discuss the situation over Puzzle Bar whisky. Our time is now."

"To fly?"

Frijo Frank drew back and gave the Mormon a strange look.

"I don't abandon the 'girl," exclaimed Mormon Mort.

"Not with twenty-five pards like those yonder knowing that you have committed an act which is punished with death in the Nevada camps?"

"They catch a man first!" came through the Mormon's teeth. "Not one of them knows that I am here. I have been the inmate of this cabin ever since Old Owlet took me from them. A residence in this shanty renders a man safe."

"Safe, eh?" cried Frijo Frank. "You are safe nowheres. You are the most marked man west of the Missouri. I don't suppose you'd take my advice?"

"What is it?"

"Let the girl go and get out of Nevada as quickly as possible."

"I'll see death first!" was the answer. "I've been playing too long for beauty and booty to do any such thing. Why, Lura Bolt, as she is called, though that is not her name, is worth to me more than her weight in gold. You don't intend to desert me, do you?"

Frijo Frank was silent, and Mormon Mort who was watching him closely took it for a sign of desertion.

"I have a friend here who will stand by me through thick and thin," he cried.

"Old Owlet?" asked Frank.

"Old Owlet!"

"Then, keep him!"

One of Frank's feet moved back as he spoke.

"I don't want a dollar," he continued as the Mormon's hand moved toward his bosom. "I agreed to help you with the girl to Utah, not to play against odds in Puzzle Bar. Keep your money, Mormon Mort. If I know anything at all you'll need it if you take up a new hand here. I am going after other stakes, if you won't quit this accursed camp."

"Not without Lura the beautiful!" was the answer.

Frijo Frank crossed the cabin's threshold and threw a look toward the open door of the Golden Fleece.

"Here comes a man!" he exclaimed, as the figure of a pedestrian appeared between him and the light.

Mormon Mort uttered a cry.

"If it be Owlet we are safe," he whispered, as Frank rejoined him.

The door of the cabin was noiselessly shut and the eager eyes of the two pards appeared at the window.

From their station they could still see the open portals of the Golden Fleece, and the figure of the man between them and the lamp.

It was a moment of suspense.

The solitary figure portended something, and as it approached the cabin, as if its destination was the door, something suddenly bright gleamed in Frijo Frank's hand.

"It may be Owlet," whispered the Mormon, in doubt. "We will know in a moment. No! by heavens! it is Volcano Van!"

The next moment the man came up and stood in the road in front of the cabin. His face was

turned toward the structure and the two men at the window could almost read the inquisitive look in his eyes.

"That is the man who was to have fallen into Owlet's snare the moment he struck Puzzle Bar!" exclaimed the Mormon. "He knows that I have been in hiding here. See how he watches the cabin."

"But he seems to believe that the bird has flown," was the answer. "If Volcano Van suspected that you were here he'd not stand out there and eye the shanty. By Jove! he's taken a step forward. He is going to investigate!"

"Good!" grated Mormon Mort, leaving the window. "I wish he would. I'll show the pards of Puzzle Bar that I'm better than Owlet to protect their interests."

"Not he is going back as if satisfied that this shanty is empty," resumed Frank. "He changed his course rather suddenly. Something has happened. Ah! I see what it was now. Another man!"

The Californian who had been disturbed in his investigations by some person had moved away as fast as he had approached the cabin, and a moment later a footfall reached the door.

As it opened Mormon Mort leaned forward to inspect their visitor.

His name was pronounced.

"By Jove! Captain Owlet, I thought you were never coming back!" he exclaimed.

The well-known voice of the gold-camp sleuth broke out into a laugh.

"An unexpected incident detained me!" he cried.

"What was it?"

"Strange to say while I was at King Romeo's Madge received a visitor."

"No!"

"It was the 'Frisco girl."

"Lura!" broke from the Mormon's throat. "She gave Frijo Frank the slip! So she is really at Puzzle Bar?"

"I left her at Romeo's," was the answer. "The two girls are fast friends already."

The Mormon Apolsle bit his lip.

"Then, I have not lost her!" he suddenly exclaimed, looking at Owlet. "I have just heard the big miner read the handbill from the whisky barrel, but no one knows I am here."

"No one? Don't deceive yourself, Mormon Mort. A man just left this vicinity. You saw him?"

"But he did not see me."

"Ah! he knows that you are here."

"Has he seen Lura?"

"Not yet."

"Then help me play a hand before he does!" and Mormon Mort clutched Owlet's sleeve. "Help the 'Frisco prize back into my power. Frank is here. He will help us with the game which must win if you head it, Owlet."

Did Mormon Mort see the twinkle that came into the eyes of the mountain detective at his words?

Old Owlet shrugged his shoulders and smiled. "My great duty is to keep the bonanza secret safe," he ejaculated. "I did not promise to play any cards for you, Mormon Mort."

"But the news I sent you from 'Frisco!" exclaimed the Mormon his brow darkening. "Turn about is fair play, Captain Owlet. If Volcano Van is still Colonel Bolt's sleuth, whose fault is it? Not mine!"

"No, not yours!" and Old Owlet leaned toward the Mormon with fire in his eyes.

"One game at Puzzle Bar is enough at a time. I have the floor at present, and I advise you to quit this camp at once and to turn your face toward Utah, for in such a move lies your bodily safety."

Mormon Mort seemed thunderstruck by words like these.

Had there been daylight in the cabin, Owlet would have seen his sharp face become colorless.

"Have you—" he began, then checked himself, for the admonishing hand of Frijo Frank was at his wrist.

"I give you ten minutes," resumed Old Owlet as coldly as before, and without another word he turned and walked away, with the Mormon's eyes looking daggers at his back.

"Lura has fascinated the Nevada spider!" cried Mort. "I see it all, Frank!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE LYNCHERS' LIMB.

TRUE it was that Lura Bolt had arrived at Puzzle Bar, and that she had already met Nevada Madge.

The young girl of the camp had not dreamed of such a meeting.

The existence of the banker's ward was not known to her, and when she turned from her vigils at King Romeo's cot to stand face to face with Mormon Mort's victim, she started back with a cry.

Old Owlet had found the girls together, friends already, for Lura had told in a few brief sentences her experience with the Mormon, but the sight was not the one that startled him.

He saw that the two girls were strikingly alike in form and feature; they had the same eyes, the same contour of face, and the resemblance was increased when they smiled.

King Romeo stretched on the cot saw the couple together and heard their whispers, but made no sign.

His eyes were fixed on them, but more particularly on Lura; they followed every motion of her lips, and drank in her smiles like a man strangely infatuated.

"I would like to rest here," spoke Lura, turning to Old Owlet, as he gave her a look ere he moved toward the door.

"You shall. Stay here as long as you want. You will keep Madge company. I am sure Madge would not be willing to give you up."

"You shall not go!" cried the beauty of Puzzle Bar. "Mormon Mort shall not reclaim you, and you need not go back to 'Frisco for a long time."

Old Owlet turned away.

"Hang me if I help to throw that child back into the web of the Utah spider!" he exclaimed.

"She escaped from him and she deserves to remain free. I know he helped me to some very important information about Volcano Van, the spy, but I will pay him back in another manner. He cannot have the 'Frisco angel!"

Thus Owlet made up his mind about a certain matter as he walked back to where he had left Mormon Mort. He did not know that Frijo Frank, Lura's guard, had come to camp, but this addition to the Mormon's forces would not deter him.

We have seen how Owlet met the Mormon, and have heard him give Mort ten minutes to leave Puzzle Bar.

Mormon Mort's opinion that Lura had captivated the mountain sleuth was not a correct one.

There was no danger of Owlet falling under the spell of bright eyes; he had passed the danger point and was safe.

When he walked from the cabin leaving the Mormon in a rage there was a quiet smile at his lips.

He went down to the Golden Fleece, about whose counter the miners of Puzzle Bar were crowded.

Against the wall near the door stuck one of Colonel Bolt's handbills. A bowie kept it to its place, and it was significant that the blade divided the name of Mormon Mort.

Every eye saw Owlet the moment he entered the ranch, and a dozen hands pointed at the poster.

The watch of the camp turned and read it as carefully as if he had not seen it before.

"Ain't that encroachin' on the feller you took from us t'other night?" queried one of the men. "The description fits him exactly, an' we'd like ter rake in ther ten thousand for a change."

Old Owlet came toward the crowd with that expression which never told anything.

"So you want to make the reward, eh?" he asked, looking it over.

"Don't we, Cap'n Owlet. We didn't get to swing the 'Frisco sport, an' we think we deserve ter nab Mormon Mort who played the cool cards ag'in' the nabob."

Old Owlet wondered if Mormon Mort had obeyed his last commands.

More than ten minutes had passed. He did not think that, with the offer of ten thousand in the hands of the miners, he would attempt to remain at the Bar.

Mormon Mort was shrewd; he ought to know that he could play no new game against Lura without the assistance of Owlet, and that he could not get.

"Mebbe the feller might have come back," Owlet said to the crowd when he had revolved several things in his mind.

"If he has we'll catch him. Whar do you think we'd be most likely ter find 'im, cap'n?"

"I don't know, but I thought I saw a match in Nevada Nat's shanty awhile ago."

"Nat wouldn't come back," was the quick response. "The man who struck King Romeo twice wouldn't be sneakin' around the halter like a fool."

"No; Nat would not be there," answered Romeo. "I don't say that the man I took away from you the other night has come back. I only mention that I thought I saw a light in Nat's shanty to-night."

There was a certain significance to Owlet's words that caused the pards of Puzzle Bar to look at one another. He had given Mormon Mort time enough to quit the camp, and he wanted to keep him away by setting the men on the lookout for him.

By a movement of this kind he would be guarding Lura from further molestation, and would in the end balk the Mormon game.

After some consultation the crowd determined to move cautiously upon the cabin.

"If we find Nevada Nat, what, cap'n?" cried the leader at the door.

"Oh, swing him!" laughed Old Owlet, who thought that the return of the accused sport was one of the most unlikely events on the calendar.

He saw the pards depart with a twinkle in his deep eyes.

"A wild-goose chase, Nantez," he ejaculated as he leaned on the counter in front of the man who kept the Golden Fleece.

"Of course. Mormon Mort may be hundreds of miles from hyer. If your friend war him,

Owlet, and you owed him anything, you did right ter take him from the boys; but you couldn't do it again."

"Maybe I wouldn't try," was the answer. "I guess I paid him off when I stepped in at the right moment the other night. They wouldn't swing him if they caught him, eh?"

"No; they'd hold him until he produced the girl and then they'd waltz him into Colonel Bolt's presence an' claim the reward. Colonel Bolt! Look hyer, Owlet?"

"Well, Nantez?"

"You told me once that our old friend Xenophon Zook, or Captain Xenophon, was a nabob in 'Frisco."

Owlet was looking into Nantez's face without a reply.

"What did become of him?" continued the bartender. "After the death of the ranch king, Sol Selden, Captain Xenophon disappeared. We never saw him again, an', by the way, we lost the captain of our own camp the same week."

"I see you have a good memory, Nantez, an excellent one," came over the bar from between Owlet's lips which did not seem to move.

"I don't forget some things," continued Nantez, with a smile. "I remember that Sol Selden had a beautiful wife and two little children, girls they were. We always thought that the hand which finished Sol that night was Captain Xenophon's."

Old Owlet showed that he was listening by the slightest bow.

"That used to be your opinion, cap'n."

"Mebbe it is yet."

"The evidence war against Xenophon Zook. I guess it war strong enough to have swung him. That war a long time ago; you have said that he went to 'Frisco, an' that he got to be a nabob thar. Now, the only 'Frisco nabob I know anything about is Colonel Bolt. Can he be Captain Xenophon?"

The sleuth-hound of Puzzle Bar drained the glass before him before he spoke again.

"Nantez, my old boy, you keep a trail well—in your mind," he answered, with a slight smile.

"I know that Colonel Bolt is Xenophon Zook!" exclaimed Nantez. "Come, Captain Owlet; give me what you know about it before the boys come back. We are alone now, and will be for a little time. Go on. What became of Mrs. Selden and the two little ones?"

Nantez's eagerness was great. He rested an elbow on the counter and riveted his eyes on the Nevada watch-dog, who gave no evidence that he was going to impart any information.

"You are right, Nantez, the 'Frisco banker is Captain Xenophon," he replied after cashing another liquid check at the whisky bank of Puzzle Bar. "I'm not going to follow him from the time he left Arizona till he became president of the Gold Eagle Bank, because I don't know much about his life between those events. Mrs. Selden, the widow of the murdered rancher, is dead; the children—"

Old Owlet paused suddenly.

"They were girls. I recollect that!" exclaimed Nantez. "I forget their names, however."

"Pearl and Ruby."

"By Jove! your k-rect!" cried the barkeeper, striking the counter with his fist. "Mrs. Selden used to call 'em her jewels. Well, what became of them?"

"I don't know." And Owlet gave Nantez a look which seemed intended to kill further inquiry in that direction. "It was a singular tragedy, with a good deal of mystery in it. Colonel Bolt remembers it very well, I presume."

"He ought to. Don't you know, Owlet, that thar's a fortune for the man who knows about the Selden tragedy? Jehosaphat! that man could walk into the Gold Eagle Bank a pauper, and come out a nabob!"

Nantez's eyes fairly glistened while he spoke.

"Mebbe you'd better try it," smiled Owlet.

The bartender drew back.

"I never did blackmail anybody, but this is a golden opportunity that oughtn't be let slip. Think of it! Colonel Bolt wouldn't be dropped from his high estate for—no, not for twenty thousand."

"Try it," grinned Owlet.

"Why, he's let Mormon Mort keep Lura and recall all his posters sooner than have 'Frisco know that he was once Xenophon Zook."

The smile grew broader on Old Owlet's face.

"Why don't you try him, Nantez?" he asked.

The next moment a loud shout came in at the door, slightly ajar.

"The boys are back!" ejaculated Nantez. "Of course they found nothing—"

"Come out an' see 'im, Captain Owlet!" called out a man who burst the door open at that moment.

"See who?" cried the Nevada ferret, starting forward.

"The man we caught in Nevada Nat's cabin. By Jove, it was a find sure enough!"

Nantez leaped over the counter and ran to the door.

There was a crowd in the square in front of the Golden Fleece, and Owlet was received with a shout.

"Look at 'im, Owlet. The fool did come back, sure enough!"

A human body was swinging back and forth under the lynchers' limb, and Old Owlet sprung toward it with a cry on his tongue.

CHAPTER XXII.

CATASTROPHE.

THE light that streamed from the door of the Golden Fleece when it was wide open, as now, revealed the scene in a measure as just described.

Old Owlet saw only the man swinging in the night wind, and for the moment he quite forgot the breathless pards who leaned forward with grin and leer to see what he would do.

"Great heavens! it is Nevada Nat!" rung suddenly from Owlet's throat.

"Who did you think it was? Didn't we say that the fool had come back?"

The sleuth of Puzzle Bar wheeled upon the crowd.

"Whar did you find him?" he exclaimed.

"In his shanty, whar you saw the match awhile ago, you know."

"I didn't think you'd find him, by Jove! I didn't!" cried Owlet, and then he went on to himself:

"I wonder what fetched him back? Did he come to clear himself of the charge of attempting King Romeo's life? The pards believe he's the man, and he'll never make me acknowledge my mistake. They've settled it forever."

"He seemed surprised ter see us," suddenly broke forth the broad-shouldered leader of the miner pards. "We went thar ter look for Mormon Mort, you know, but we found that one. It was fish when we looked for fowl, Cap'n Owlet; but no difference. Thar war Romeo ter be avenged, an' I guess we've done it. Thar's nothin' slow about Puzzle Bar when she gits ter work."

Owlet turned from the spokesman to the body that almost touched him.

"Mormon Mort has quit camp," he mentally ejaculated. "I guess ten minutes war more than he wanted."

Then he told the crowd to go into the Golden Fleece and drink at his expense, an invitation which they were not loth to accept after the tragical ending to their hunt for the Mormon.

Owlet was thus left alone with the body under the limb.

"I want to make sure thet he's got nothin' on him that'll give the boys any inklin' of my error," said Owlet, as he plunged one hand into Nevada Nat's bosom. "I don't mind hanging the wrong man occasionally, but I've got a record for makin' no mistakes that I don't want to break."

"Who did this?" asked a sudden voice at the sleuth's back.

Old Owlet turned and saw Madge so near that he could have touched her.

"What makes you want to know, girl?" was the question as he leaned forward. "This is Nevada Nat, the runaway; he came sneakin' back for a purpose, probably to try the third time—"

"Aren't you going to cut the body down?" interrupted the girl, stepping nearer and throwing up one hand.

"Mebbe the boys wouldn't like it."

"I say cut him down! You have a knife, Owlet. The man may not be dead."

"Dead es a door nail!" ejaculated Owlet, a savage glitter in his eyes, and then he raised his voice till it could be heard in the saloon a few feet away:

"I say this is the boys' hangin', an' I'm not authorized to cut it down."

"No cutting down out thar!" swiftly came the response from the Golden Fleece, and a big man appeared at the door.

"This is brutality enough to disgrace savages!" announced Madge, facing the man in the door. "I say that your victim shall be cut down!"

By this time half a dozen men had emerged from the Golden Fleece, and the young girl stood before them with undaunted mien.

"You gentlemen will stand back while Owlet lowers the body," she went on. "I want no collision with the people among whom I have dwelt. Nevada Nat had no trial—"

"His going off proved it!"

"Proved what?" and Madge looked squarely at the sullen speaker.

"It proved that he tried ter take King Romeo's life," was the answer.

A faint smile was seen at the corners of Madge's mouth.

"Why don't you proceed, Owlet?" she cried, turning from the crowd to the detective, who had not even drawn his knife for the purpose of severing the rope.

Owlet threw a look toward the miners.

"Let her have her way. Thar'll never be a trial for Nevada Nat," the leader said.

The next moment the big blade of Owlet's knife gleamed in the lamplight, and then came the thud of the body as it struck the ground, where it lay black and motionless.

The miner pards grinned at Madge as if they wondered what would be her next movement.

"I call this a piece of work which will forever

stain the name of Puzzle Bar!" the girl exclaimed, walking forward. "You ought to know that this man should have had a trial."

She had looked up and encountered the half-threatening eyes of Owlet.

"Why didn't you give him a chance?" she went on.

"I didn't get the chance to," he answered. "He was swinging hyer when the boys called me out to see the body."

A moment later Nevada Madge was bending over the body, and her fingers loosened the noose which seemed to have sunk into the neck.

The crowd standing a little ways off watched her in silence. There were triumphant twinkles in the eyes of some, and only a few wished they had been less basty.

All at once Madge looked up.

"There is a spark of life here!" she exclaimed. "The heart beats!"

There was a visible start on the part of the crowd.

"Are you going to stand there and let that spark go out for want of fanning?" she went on with flashing eyes. "Has Nevada Madge no friend in Puzzle Bar who will lend her a hand she needs? Are you all so eager for blood that you won't give me a lift?"

It was an appeal which proved irresistible.

As for Owlet he did not move, but nearly one-half of the crowd came forward, and the big leader so brutish a moment before asked the girl for orders.

"Pick the man up and take him to my cabin," she replied, and then almost instinctively her eyes sought out the mountain sleuth. "He may have a chance to prove his innocence yet if innocent he is."

Owlet made no reply, but with the sullenness that characterized him when crossed he walked toward the Golden Fleece, leaving Madge to have it out with the men.

He did not stop to resume with Nantez the conversation about Colonel Bolt's past life, but glanced into the bar-room as he passed, and frowned.

"There ar' too many bosses hyer for me!" he growled. "I see that I've got to reduce the number or give up the game. Nat is too far gone for Madge to pull him back to life. I'm not afraid of thet. I see thet I've got to play a deadly card against the spy from 'Frisco. Gold Grip must shield him no longer. Before the morning comes I will make the bonanza secret forever safe!"

Meantime the strong arms of four men were bearing Nevada Nat toward the cabin occupied by Madge. The girl had gone ahead to make a few simple preparations for his reception.

The carriers, as they tramped through the starlight, looked down into their victim's face with eyes softened, as it were, by Madge's solicitude. If they had to re-enact the scene, it was evident that there would not be so much haste.

The girl met them at the door of the cabin, and looked anxiously at the hanged sport.

"How is he, Hilliard?" she asked.

"The sport's thar yet, miss," was the reply.

"If anything, it seems a little stronger."

"Thank Heaven!" ejaculated Madge, and when the men had deposited their burden on the cot she had prepared for it, she turned to them with some well-chosen words of thanks.

"I promise you that he will stand trial if he lives," she said. "But I say that no hand of his ever drew a drop of King Romeo's blood."

The pards looked at Madge astonished, and then at each other.

"Let us wait until then," she went on. "Give Nevada Nat a chance. He went away for another purpose. I now know why. If Hilliard will remain and help me, the rest of you can go."

It was the strong hands of Hilliard that had seized Nevada Nat in his cabin, it was the same hands that had thrown the noose over his head, and it was his voice which had given the whispered command to "pull!"

Despite all this, Hilliard was ready to remain behind and help Madge bring Nevada Nat back to life, and in a little while they were the only active occupants of the cabin.

Hilliard of Puzzle Bar was a man who had roughed it in a dozen rough parts of the Wild West. He had once seen a hanged man resuscitated, and he told Madge about it in disjointed sentences, as he worked with Nevada Nat.

The girl took courage from the start, and when the spark of life which she had discovered in Nat's breast had grown into long breaths, her face beamed with joy.

"You can finish him now," she ejaculated, clutching Hilliard's sleeve. "I have been away from Romeo too long already. I left Lura there—"

"Who is Lura?" interrupted Hilliard.

"What! don't you know? Ah! her arrival is not known to the whole camp. Lura is Colonel Bolt's daughter."

"The one Mormon Mort stole from 'Frisco? Jehosaphat! she has escaped from the rascal."

"She is free!" exclaimed Madge. "I left her with Romeo. One look at him, a word with Lura, and I will come back."

The girl was gone before Hilliard could frame an answer. He heard her a moment beyond the

door and then went back to his victim and patient.

"I did not reach the mob a second too soon," ejaculated Madge, as she bounded through the starlight toward Romeo's cabin. "Owlet did not like my interference, but he dared not lift his hand. I stand too close to Romeo, the King of the Mine. Owlet knows that Nevada Nat might prove his innocence and forever ruin his fame as a mountain detective."

"Thank Heaven! you have come!" exclaimed a voice, as Madge opened King Romeo's door. "I wanted to summon you, but I dared not leave him alone."

"What has happened?"

"He talked about a thousand things awhile ago, he asked for pencil and paper. I gave him both, and he wrote like a mad person for a while. He is quiet now, asleep, I believe."

Nevada Madge went forward to the bed, followed by Lura.

She took the lamp from the table and held it over King Romeo's face.

"At last," she suddenly cried. "My God! at last!"

The cause for her wild exclamation was apparent enough.

King Romeo was dead!

CHAPTER XXIII.

WITHIN AND WITHOUT.

THE battle which had been going on for some days between death and man had resulted in favor of the King of Terrors.

King Romeo, the head master of the secret bonanza, had died as quietly as a child sleeps, without even disturbing the vigils of Lura, who had been left to guard him by his betrothed.

For a moment after Madge's startling discovery of death, the two girls stood silent beside the couch.

The face of Nevada Madge was pale, and moisture glistened in her deep brown eyes.

There was no doubt of her affection for the big rough fellow whose word had been law to the stalwart men he had gathered around him.

"One life has just gone out, there is another to be saved, two of them, perhaps," suddenly exclaimed Madge, turning upon Lura.

"What do you mean?"

The girl of the camp went to the door and looked carefully out before she replied:

"Let the secret of this death be kept from the camp awhile," she whispered, coming back. "Puzzle Bar must know it soon, but there are two men who must know it now. Volcano Van is one of them."

Lura started.

She knew that the 'Frisco sport was in camp, but they had not met. Her last sight of him was when she pleaded with Colonel Bolt not to send him on the hazardous mission, and when he held her back and let him depart.

Now fate had thrown them into the same mountain nest.

"Gold Grip cannot save him if Owlet pushes his hatred," continued Madge. "When the sleuth of Puzzle Bar knows that King Romeo is dead he will play one of those terrible hands for which he is famous. I know the man."

"Who succeeds to Romeo's place?" asked Lura.

"Nevada Nat by right, but he has just been rescued from the noose, and the charge of murder is against him."

"Who is the third man of the Seven?"

"Gold Grip; but he has made enemies by protecting Volcano Van. Don't you see the dangerous state of affairs? There are two men in camp who are at the mercy of Owlet and the men he can influence. After Gold Grip comes a man called Bowie Bart, who never felt a spark of humanity warm his heart. He and Owlet are not the fastest of friends. If Hilliard stood next to Gold Grip the crisis would not be so great, but he is the very last in the line of succession. I know the whole code of Puzzle Bar; it is intricate and dark; there is not another like it in existence. Will you watch King Romeo awhile longer, Lura? There is something to be done now. Ah! you know it."

Yes, Lura Bolt knew that a crisis had come.

"Go! do your work. Warn them. Don't tell him that I am here, else he might want to remain. I tried to keep him back in 'Frisco, but Colonel Bolt drove him to the trail. I will guard the dead."

Madge threw a look toward the cot, then returning caught Lura's eyes.

"You say he wrote something before he died?" she said.

"He did."

"Where is it?"

"Under the pillow, probably."

"Hold the lamp down that I may look for it."

Lura obeyed and watched her companion with much interest while she sought for the document.

It was not under the pillow as Lura had supposed, nor did the dead man's hands hold it. Madge's search proved futile, and when she showed Lura her face again, it was seamed with disappointment.

"He could not have destroyed it?" she asked.

"I cannot think so. It was too important for that."

"It must be found, Lura. It may have been his will, a command, and it should fall into the right hands. Look for it while I am gone, for I cannot tarry here. Above all things, Lura, don't let anybody come in till I come back."

Lura's look was promise enough, and the next moment Madge was off.

There was a bolt on the rough door, one of the few bolts in the camp, for under the floor in a strong chest King Romeo kept wealth enough to enrich more than one man.

Lura pushed the bolt into its socket after Madge's departure, and went over to the dead.

Never before had she been thrown into a position of this kind. Her earliest recollections were of luxury, and not of the wildness of a gold-camp. She had never kept vigils over the dying or the dead, much less had she ever been called upon to search a corpse for a concealed paper.

Nerving herself to the task imposed by Madge, Lura went to work. She wanted to get through with it as quickly as possible, but she intended to make the search a thorough one.

In the midst of the work she heard the fall of a booted foot.

It was outside and only once she heard it.

As a thrill swept over her her hands grew still and she turned her head toward the window.

There were no victorious eyes to reward her look, but something told her that she should not go back to her task.

Lura rose slowly and slipped to the door.

In a moment she knew that she had not been startled by a false alarm.

There were voices just beyond the door.

Just above the girl's head hung the leathern belt of the man who lay dead on his camp cot, and above it peeped two revolvers.

Lura's eyes seemed to get a thankful look as she saw formidable helps that silently offered themselves, and the next moment her hand drew one out and found it already cocked.

"There's a curtain at the window," ejaculated a voice, which was clearly heard by the breathless girl at the door.

"Can't you see anything at all?"

"Only the lamp on the table and something like a man's body on the bed."

"That is Romeo. Madge isn't in there, and we know it; the other one must be."

"I don't see her."

There came a moment of fate and silence.

"I'll try the door," came the reply at last. "These mountain cabins have no bolts."

"Try this one and see," mentally ejaculated Lura, as she threw a glance at the big bolt resting securely in its socket.

After a little pause the latch clicked slightly, and the door was pushed inward, but of course did not open.

"A bolt, by all that's holy!" exclaimed a voice outside. "The girl is a stranger here, and girl-like, she'd naturally bolt it if thar was a bolt handy. What's to be done?"

"We must get in or she must come out. Give me a chance."

Lura heard some one quit the door, but a moment later the latch clicked as before.

"We're bolted out!" grated a voice; "but bolts and bars don't keep me from the final stakes. Go out there and stand guard."

"In the street?"

"Yes, but in the deep shadow of the shanty. The pards o' Puzzle Bar ar' at the Golden Fleece, and the door is shut. Owlet, the double-face, is the person we ar' to guard against."

"What are you going to do?"

"I intend to charge the door, and make the bolt yield like a stick!"

The girl inside stepped back and clutched her revolver with a firmer grip. Her beautiful face without color was strikingly defiant, and her fine figure, drawn up to its true height, was the acme of statuary magnificence.

"I don't want the life of the infamous serpent out yonder," passed over her lips. "I am willing that justice shall strike him with another hand than mine."

Then she took one step toward the door, and spoke in clear tones.

"I am here and have heard all," she exclaimed. "I know that you are Mormon Mort, the man who won in California to lose in Nevada. I am not going back to the toils. This is King Romeo's castle, and an attempt to force it might be followed by disastrous results."

If Lura could have looked through the heavy door at that moment she would have seen the man whom her words had startled.

At the first sound the tall figure of Mormon Mort had sprung back, and he was listening with bated breath to the girl's words.

She knew him! Why attempt concealment now?

"It is all the same, my fair child, whether you open the door or not?" he suddenly exclaiming going back to the portal. "The man with you is past help. If you think that Mormon Mort, who has been proscribed because of your beauty, intends to be chased off by a threat, you are sold. Shall you witness a charge for love, or will you save King Romeo's door by opening it to the Mormon King?"

"I open nothing to you!" was the quick reply, and then Lura stepped away and halted by the table awaiting the charge.

Outside the Mormon threw a look over his shoulder at the dark figure standing in the street.

He still had Frijo Frank in the game; a new bargain and a promise of big stakes in Utah had kept the sport at his side.

All at once the Mormon drew off and looked at the cabin door. It was to be human strength against a bolt, and Mormon Mort had boundless confidence in his powers.

"Look out, Frank," he cried to the man in the road, as he gathered strength for the dash.

"Hold on a moment!" and Frijo Frank came bounding forward.

"What is it?"

"The girl may be quietly waiting for you with a six-shooter."

"Lura?"

"Yes."

"She's got nothing of the kind."

"But King Romeo has."

"He can't lift a toy pistol if Owlet hasn't lied."

"Let me look in once more."

Mormon Mort made no reply but let his pard carry out his purpose.

Frijo Frank did not remain at the window long.

"Well?" remarked Mort as he rejoined him.

"The girl is standing at the table, and there seems to be something in her hand."

A light laugh full of derision, broke over the Mormon's lips.

"The crash will confuse her!" he exclaimed.

"I wouldn't like to charge if it was Madge who has been raised in the mountains, but the child of luxury—bah! she won't hurt anybody!"

Frijo Frank walked off with a look that called the Mormon sport a fool.

The following moment Mormon Mort collected his strength for the second time, and then sprung forward like a Titan.

The collision was as terrible as a desperate man could make it.

Frijo Frank turned as he struck the door.

"Ha! hit! The girl touched the trigger. I knew she would!" cried the pard, for Mormon Mort was staggering away with his hands clutching the air above his head!

CHAPTER XXIV.

FOLLOWED TOO FAR.

THE reader must not think that since his coming to Puzzle Bar, Volcano Van had forgotten his mission.

He had not.

Despite his espionage by Old Owlet, and notwithstanding the startling events which followed it he had gained a point or two which promised to be of great advantage to Colonel Bolt.

The unexpected revelation that Gold Grip was his true brother—the 'Frisco sport did not doubt it now—had filled him with amazement; but Gold Grip had failed to coax or frighten him from camp.

The secret of the bonanza was still a secret; the men who went to it did so in the dark hours that preceded the dawn, and came away during the night.

But the events with which we have dealt, had kept them from the mine, and Van's cautious espionage had not furthered his cause to any extent.

"Very well," Gold Grip had said to him at the end of the last appeal for flight. "I will never lift my hand against you, but I cannot promise protection. If King Romeo should die, Owlet will be the master spirit here if he chooses to assert himself openly. An oath stands between me and the secret you want to carry back to 'Frisco. It seals my lips; but if you find the bonanza I will not try to prevent you from taking a report back to the man you serve. The field is open to you, but be careful. You cannot make a movement here without being seen. You are under the Sleepless Eye. Remember that."

And to be under that eye was to be seen by the most merciless of western sleuths.

While Mormon Mort, who would not go off as long as Lura remained at Puzzle Bar, was preparing to throw himself against the cabin door, Volcano Van was following the mysterious movements of a man in the suburbs of the camp.

He had caught sight of this person in the camp itself, and by some shrewdness on his part had discovered that it was his old enemy, Owlet.

It was probable that the mountain detective was up to something by his shadowy movements among the scattering cabins, and Volcano Van, ever on the alert for a clew which would finally take him to the hidden mine, was not going to lose sight of him.

For once Owlet seemed to think that he was not followed, or at least not by the man whom he had sworn to entrap.

He led Volcano Van a circuitous chase among the rocks and bushes which hemmed the camp in like an artificial wall, and all at once he disappeared as if the ground had opened and engulfed him.

A gleam of intense satisfaction came to the

gentleman sport's eyes when he saw that the man of cunning had vanished.

It meant simply that Owllet had reached his destination, and that that destination was the lost mine!

After a series of cautious, fox-like movements, Volcano Van reached the spot where he last saw the figure of the Sleepless Eye.

The place was gloomy, almost entirely dark, rocks and bushes on every side.

The brilliant stars gave light enough to show him that the ground under his feet had been trod before. A little path, hardly more than a trail, was revealed to his restive eyes.

Crawling forward and piercing the bushes, revolver in hand, he entered an opening whose walls and ceiling were hard.

The lost bonanza!

No wonder that the thought sent a thrill to the heart of the cool detective.

Before him was stygian gloom and silence. If it had swallowed Old Owllet, and it certainly had, no sound came back to proclaim the cavern's triumph.

It was not Volcano Van's intention to let the present discovery suffice for the night. He had found just enough to urge him on.

Still carrying the cocked revolver in a position which rendered it available for instant service, he pushed on.

The deeper he went into the darkness the surer became he of the importance of his find.

Old Owllet, the guardian of the secret, had led the Californian spy to it! There was poignant pleasure in this thought to Volcano Van.

On, on he went, as if the narrow passage was to lead him underground to 'Frisco. At last he emerged into a chamber whose ceiling he could not touch.

He halted in the darkness and listened.

After a long while he heard a noise. The walls seemed to bear the not unmusical sounds to his ears, and by close attention he was enabled to detect the direction from which they came.

When he moved forward again, it was to the noises he had heard.

Somebody was striking rock or metal with a steel implement. Volcano Van's experience with mines told him this.

Now and then the sounds would cease, but the walls would soon echo them anew.

Was it Owllet?

At length the 'Frisco sport had to crawl through a narrow passage.

He was almost upon the maker of the sounds. At the end of the corridor he would certainly find him.

During all these movements Volcano Van did not think that he might be decoyed into a new trap. Cool and sagacious, he thought, and with good reason, too, that Old Owllet had come to the mine, dreamless that anybody was at his heels.

When the Californian emerged from the corridor he came into the rays of a light that rendered ghostly everything he saw.

The sounds were now rightly located, and in a moment Volcano Van was gazing at a solitary miner who, pick in hand, was attacking a wall from which pieces of rock flew and fell at his feet.

"By Jove! a red miner!" ejaculated the Californian, almost aloud. "And he is chained to the wall, too!"

The sight was so startling, that Volcano Van bounded forward and halted in the light which came from a lamp fastened against the wall just above the miner's head.

Riveted to the ground as it were, by the strange sight, Volcano Van saw nothing but the stalwart, half naked man who swung the heavy pick as though it was a toy.

He was a full-blood Indian, with a mass of black hair hanging down his back and tied here and there with pieces of deer-hide. His nether limbs were clad in dirty buckskin and the semblance of a fringe still adhered to the seams.

The massive chest and the Atlantean shoulders, the muscled arms and the kingly head of the red giant were enough to excite the Californian's wonder and admiration.

One of the Indian's ankles wore a manacle, and to this was attached a chain which permitted him to stand back far enough to wield the heavy pick.

He assaulted the wall with an intensity which seemed to say that he was trying to cut his way to freedom beyond it.

Volcano Van crept nearer.

There was a thick dust on the floor of the cavern and his approach was not heard. He wanted to see the Indian's features; the figure rendered him curious.

All at once the blows ceased, the red miner lowered his pick and set it against the wall.

"All right, Red Crest. The fool has come!"

The words came from a point behind Volcano Van. At sound of them the Indian wheeled and saw him irresolute among the stones.

The next moment there was a cry and a bound and the chain lengthened enough to let the red miner touch the 'Frisco ferret!

"Not yet! this is a game for two!" ejaculated Volcano Van, slipping away before the touch of the fingers became a grip of steel.

The Indian was like a mad mastiff at the end of his chain.

"You will keep your distance!" cried Van, covering the red-skin with his revolver. "Stoop to loosen your chain for a second leap, and I'll put an end to your mining."

He wondered why there was no voice behind him, and in the silence that followed his own words he saw the flashes of the Indian's eyes, and the broad bosom that rose and fell like waves in a storm.

The strange miner was handsome for one of his race, but there were seams in his face, and a certain look which breathed of a spirit cowed by the slavery of chain and pick.

"What white fool come for?" suddenly asked the Indian. "Does he want to fight the gold stone with a chain about his ankles? Is the white eagle tired of the skies that he seeks the heart of the ground to keep Red Crest company? He is a fool!"

The Indian's voice was not unmusical. As he finished he threw his head back and struck an attitude of pride.

"They've caught you, I see," replied Volcano Van, throwing a glance downward at the chain and iron bracelet.

"The band of the pale-faced serpents caught Red Crest in their trap. He trailed them to the bonanza and in an evil hour, when he thought he had a secret to sell the rich men in the city by the great waters, the trap was sprung. Then came the chain and pick, and the band that never touched the tool of the slave was made to work for life. The Navajoes watch for the chief who was to find the gold-mine, but he comes not with the secret. The pale foxes say that, if Red Crest picks his way through the wall he can go back to his people. Has the white man come to help him?"

"To be chained like you to life-long slavery?" cried Volcano Van. "I have come hither for no such thing!"

The Indian leaned forward, a sudden sparkle in the depths of his black eyes.

"Why did the rattlesnake of the mountain den tell Red Crest that the fool had come?" he ejaculated.

Instinctively the Californian drew back.

"The voice I heard awhile ago was his?" he exclaimed.

"It is the voice of the man who entrapped the eagle of the Navajoes."

"And the owner of that voice is in pretty good repair!" was the answer from a spot beyond the circle of light cast by the light on the wall.

Volcano Van's hand got a firmer grip on the revolver as the words struck his ears.

"Come out!" he cried to the speaker. "I challenge you to a combat, a duel to the death, for the secret of the Puzzle Bar bonanza! I know that I address Old Owllet, the ferret of the Banded Seven! Come forward!"

The Indian looked across the cavern, and Volcano Van waited in the light, but Owllet's answer to the challenge was a laugh of triumph.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE WARNING.

WHAT of Nevada Madge's mission?

The girl was left on her way to warn two men to look to the future, for King Romeo was dead.

"If I can save them I will be satisfied," she murmured. "The truth when it comes out will turn the pards of Puzzle Bar against Nat, and Owllet, without Romeo to curb him, will turn upon the 'Frisco sport."

Madge proceeded first to her own cabin, where she had left Nevada Nat under Hilliard's care.

The eyes of two men met hers as she opened the door and crossed the threshold.

"It is all over," she exclaimed in a low voice, as she sprung forward, her look seeming to meet all eyes at once.

Hilliard started.

"Death has won, then?" he ejaculated, and his lips met firmly behind the last word.

"Romeo is dead?"

Was it strange that Hilliard's glance should seek Nevada Nat's face?

"You must go!" cried Madge, touching Nat's arm.

"Why?" was the question that met her. "The blood of King Romeo is not on my hands. Did he ever say it was?"

"No."

The man whose head had lately filled a tightened noose got up.

"I am ready for trial!" he cried.

"But they won't give you any!" was the quick response. "The report of Romeo's death will make tigers of the pards of Puzzle Bar. I know them all, and so do you."

Nevada Nat did not answer.

"Who saw Romeo die?" asked the giant Hilliard.

"Lura."

"Didn't he say anything before he went off?" Madge thought of the writing Lura had spoken of, but she wanted to see that first.

"He went to sleep and died," she replied.

Hilliard looked disappointed.

"This is strange," the giant muttered. "He

told me once that if he felt the worst coming, he would leave some orders behind. But if he died without doing it, that'll be a time in camp."

"You won't give them a chance to repeat the episode of the Square, will you?" suddenly resumed Madge, turning to Nevada Nat. "Why don't you put in a word for me, Hilliard? Don't you advise flight?"

Thus appealed to, Hilliard felt obliged to deliver an opinion.

"I wouldn't like to run off if I was innocent," he answered.

"But with a lot of madmen—a mob—to fight, with a man like Owllet—"

"Hang Owllet!" interrupted Nat. "The sleuth of Puzzle Bar has been my secret enemy ever since his shadow fell on our ground. If he is to show his hand, I will remain."

For an instant the eyes of the girl flashed up.

"You underrate the watch-dog of your bonanza, and yet you ought to know him!" she cried, confronting the hanged sport. "It is not cowardice to fly from almost certain death. Hilliard knows the temper of the men who will respond with cries of vengeance to the report of King Romeo's death. He knows that the crown of Puzzle Bar will descend to Bowie Bart."

"I am the first in the line of succession, but I yield my claims," smiled Nevada Nat.

"It is well you do, for they would not be respected. Gold Grip's mysterious friendship for Volcano Van has removed him from the line, and the rulership of this camp will fall to a man without mercy."

"I know Bowie Bart!" replied Nat. "For years that man has had his eye on the title which by common consent we gave to Romeo at a meeting of the bonanza Seven. But I am not afraid to test his courage. If it was Hilliard here, we'd get along."

A faint smile at Hilliard's lips was suddenly chased away by a frown.

"Make up your mind!" ejaculated Madge, drawing back. "Help him to a right decision, Hilliard. You know the situation. Don't show a fool's courage, Nevada Nat. Good-night."

"A fool's courage, eh?" laughed Nevada Nat, as the door closed behind the girl and he caught Hilliard's eyes. "You have heard the story of my love for that girl. I have told you, Hilliard, how, when I went to her to tell her all, I found that she had chosen King Romeo. You know that I left camp to escape the muddle into which Owllet was about to throw me. He failed for once to find the right man; but he never corrects a mistake. I came back to Puzzle Bar for no man's blood. You found me in my cabin, where you expected to find Mormon Mort, the Utah Spider. Another crisis has come, Hilliard. The man who came between Madge and me is dead, but with not a drop of his blood on these hands. What would you do in my place? Put yourself there for a moment, and speak as you would speak for yourself."

The two men stood face to face in the light of Madge's lamp.

The appeal was irresistible. Hilliard could not evade it in any way.

"What would I do under the circumstances?" he suddenly exclaimed. "By the souls of the saints! I'd stay and fight it out!"

"Thanks, Hilliard," cried Nevada Nat. "Were I guilty I might go, but innocent I stand my ground against the blood-hunters of Puzzle Bar!"

"That's jes' what they'll be before an hour—blood-hunters," ejaculated Hilliard. "I speak to you as I'd speak for myself were I in your boots. I believe in your innocence, but that war a time when I believed you as guilty as Judas."

Nevada Nat held out his hand, and the big fingers of the giant Hilliard closed about it in a grasp of friendship.

"Mebbe I can't help you much, Nat," he continued.

"I don't ask it; only don't be against me."

"I'll not be your foe. Let us take time by the forelock. There is a play which if well made may dull the teeth of our Nevada tigers. Will you follow me?"

"I am at your heels, Hilliard."

"Then take this. You may need it," and the speaker handed Nat a revolver from his own belt. "The boys took yours when they pounced upon you in the shanty, and I don't know what became of them. We will make the announcement that is expected to revolutionize Puzzle Bar, and we'll do it whar we'll have the biggest audience."

A moment later the two men went out and the nearest cabin in Puzzle Bar, because it was Madge's, was deserted.

Nevada Nat still felt sore from the rope which had nearly strangled him to death. He knew how miraculous his escape had been and to whom he owed his life.

Did he think that with King Romeo dead and Caliban and his dagger strangely missing, there was still a chance for the heart of Madge of the bonanza camp?

Meantime the girl, doubtful of the success of her mission to Nevada Nat, had hastened to Gold Grip's cabin.

By the merest chance she missed Mormon Mort and Frijo Frank advancing to the attack

on Romeo's shanty, and when she found Gold Grip he was alone.

A look of surprise lit up his eyes when he beheld the girl, and then he saw the inquisitive look she threw around the room.

"My ward, as Puzzle Bar calls him, is not here," smiled Gold Grip.

Madge showed her keen disappointment.

"When will he come back?" she asked.

"Within an hour, perhaps."

"Does he know that the catastrophe has come at last? No, he cannot know it."

"What has happened?"

The girl caught Gold Grip's intense eagerness and lowered her voice as she leaned toward him.

"The king is dead."

Gold Grip drew back with a quick start.

"When did it happen?" he asked, in a wild manner.

"A while ago."

"What was his last command?"

The girl looked strangely at the man before her.

Hilliard had asked the same question. What did it mean?

"He left no commands, Lura says."

"He always said he would. Didn't he write before he died—not a line, not a word?"

Madge hesitated, and saw the accusing eyes of Gold Grip upon her.

She had professed at different times to see a mysterious bond of union between the two men. More than once she had seen them in secret conference until she believed that a link of some kind united them.

"I can trust Gold Grip," she thought. "He is not like Hilliard, to whom I dared not talk about the writing King Romeo left somewhere." And then she went on to the Nevadan.

"He wrote something before he died," she remarked.

"Ah! I thought so. Where is it, Madge?"

Gold Grip held out his hand, but the girl shook her head, with a smile.

"We have been unable to find it," she said.

"Where did you look for it?"

"Under his head, among the bedclothes—everywhere."

"No, not everywhere, girl!" cried the sport. "Let me try my eyes in the cabin a little while."

"You can do so, but I remain here."

"Why?"

"Volcano Van may come back, and I want to warn him that the death of Romeo is against him."

"It is dead against Nevada Nat, too."

"I have just come from him."

"Will he go?"

"I left him undecided with Hilliard to urge him to get away."

"My word he will not go. I can tell you that."

"Then he must take the consequences."

"Oh he's been told what they'll be," smiled Gold Grip. "He came to Puzzle Bar with not a single chance in his favor, and the skies have darkened since his coming. You can't move him if he comes back. Does Puzzle Bar know of the death?"

"Not yet. When I have seen the 'Frisco sport it may know."

The following minute Madge was alone in her cabin, and Gold Grip was on his way to the dead.

"He wrote something that the girls cannot find, did he?" he ejaculated. "Let me get my hands on it, and I'll be armed against them all. He promised me that he would leave something, and I never thought he could make Madge his wife with the past that was behind him."

It was not long after the assault by Mormon Mort and Lura's shot through the door when Gold Grip reached the mountain king's abode.

The girl, who waited for a renewal of the attack, waited revolver in hand, heard his heavy step.

"Open to Gold Grip!" he exclaimed, finding the bolt still in its place. "I come from Madge. I know that Romeo is dead."

Eager to have a friend by her the banker's ward opened the door and Gold Grip strode in.

He did not give Lura a chance to narrate her defense, but went to the corpse and ran his arm under the lost blanket. The next moment a smile lightened his bronze face.

He had found something.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MASTERING THE SITUATION.

"Don't you know? King Romeo is dead?"

The man to whom these words were addressed by the darkest skinned man in Puzzle Bar, was a person who had just entered the Golden Fleece.

The hearer stopped and for a moment looked undecided.

It was Owlet.

"So death got the fatal grip?" he ejaculated, as he moved forward suddenly.

"He is cold by this time," answered the man who had made the announcement, and then he approached Owlet and continued in lower tones:

"I'd like to see you for a few moments in private."

"Not now, Bart."

"Not for a moment?"

"Not for a second," and Old Owlet pushed forward to the bar. "I'm going down to Romeo's now. Somebody may be needed there. How is Nevada Nat coming on? Did Madge bring him to?"

"He just left hyer," said Bowie Bart through his teeth and in no good humor.

"And you know that Romeo was dead?"

These words seemed to be addressed to the whole crowd.

"Hilliard came with 'em, and after a confab we decided to give Nat a show to prove his innocence."

Owlet lowered his brow, and lifted the glass he had filled.

"Give him a chance, boys. I won't complain," he remarked, chasing the frown away with one of his peculiar smiles which few of his pards understood. "Mebby we have been too fast with Nevada. Give him a dozen chances if he wants 'em. Fix the time by mutual agreement and let's have fair play."

Some of the men looked into each other's faces.

Was this the man who knew that Nevada Nat had taken King Romeo's life by blows struck at different times? Surely behind his willingness to give the accused sport a chance to clear himself lay some deep scheme worthy the brain of the Sleepless Eye.

Old Owlet was watched with a great deal of curiosity when he turned on his heel and walked out.

Bowie Bart was not far behind him.

"One moment and now," exclaimed a voice behind the bonanza sleuth, and Owlet turned with an expression of pique and waited for Bart to come up.

"Well, what is it?" he asked brusquely.

"The death of King Romeo leaves Puzzle Bar without a chief," said Bart laying the tips of his long fingers significantly on Owlet's arm. "You know that Nevada Nat stands next in the line of promotion, but there's a charge against him; then comes Gold Grip."

"Well?"

"Can we afford to take for king one who harbors spies?"

Owlet did not unglue his lips.

"After Gold Grip comes Bowie Bart at your service, and you know that we need a man who will walk straight to duty without fear or favor."

The dark sport of Puzzle Bar was talking for himself.

"Is it time for this yet?" asked Owlet.

"Why not? There is to be a trial for murder, and after that another trial for spying."

"Don't be too sure of all of this," grinned Owlet. "The trial for spying may never take place," and he added significantly, "I don't think it ever will!"

Bowie Bart's look preceded his natural expression by an instant.

"What! has the fellow run away?"

"I have not said so. We'll attend to the succession some other time—to-morrow, perhaps."

"The trial may take place then. We've about agreed as to the time. Say that I can rely on you, Owlet."

"For what?"

"For elevation to the place held by King Romeo."

Old Owlet seemed to draw back a pace.

"I can't promise now," he remarked, quietly.

Bowie Bart bit his lip under the mustache that drooped over it.

"I give all warning now," he grated, "that we object to Gold Grip's promotion."

His eyes were flashing like the orbs of a teased tiger, and Owlet seemed to enjoy his rage.

"You may not find Gold Grip contentious," Owlet said, coolly. "The right is his, if he wants to exercise it."

"But what will you do if he attempts it?"

"Wait till the emergency arrives."

"No!" And Bart's fingers got a sudden grip on Owlet's arm. "I want to know now; there are others back o' me. You must not forget that I am a member of the Seven."

The next instant the sleuth of Puzzle Bar jerked from the clutch and threw up his hands as he looked into Bart's blazing eyes.

"And you want to remember that the bonanza secret owes its existence as a kept secret to me!" he exclaimed. "I saved it to-night. Go back to the Golden Fleece, or elsewhere. You can't force Owlet to your designs by any reminder of authority. I am here by a decree which cannot be altered without a certain signature, and the only hand that could make it lies yonder, cold and dead! I trust there will be no conflict of authority in Puzzle Bar at this time. We can't afford to have it, Bowie Bart!"

And with the last word Old Owlet wheeled and walked off, with the tread of a victor through the starlight.

Bowie Bart looked at him like a man in a maze.

"He takes the bull by the horns with a vengeance," he ejaculated. "What did he mean when he said he has just saved the secret? I thought I could draw him over to my scheme, because he doesn't like Gold Grip for interfering

in Volcano Van's behalf. But here he declines to come over, and advises me to wait till to-morrow. I know where he will be when the crisis comes. He didn't try to conceal his preference."

Bowie Bart walked back toward the Golden Fleece in the very worst of humor, and Owlet was permitted to march on to King Romeo's cabin, where he found both Lura and Madge, the latter having lately arrived from Gold Grip's where she had waited without results for Volcano Van's return.

The coming of the mountain sleuth was totally unexpected, and the two girls greeted him with disturbed faces.

Gold Grip had gone without telling either that he had found something under the dead man, and Madge had just completed another fruitless search.

"What made that hole in the door—a bullet?" suddenly queried Owlet.

"A bullet," replied Lura. "A while ago I was compelled to defend the cabin against an assault."

"By whom?"

"By Mormon Mort."

"After you yet, eh?" ejaculated Owlet.

"She hit the villain, too!" exclaimed Madge, putting in her voice ahead of Lura.

"At close range, too, and with one o' Romeo's forty-fours!"

"He fell out in the road," answered Lura, calmly. "I hope I haven't finished him, for I don't want even a rascal's life. After he fell he rose and staggered off till he was caught by a man who helped him away."

"That man was Frijo Frank, who won't lead any revenges for the Utah adder," exclaimed Owlet, and then he picked up the lamp and held it for a little while close to the set features of the king of the mine.

Old Owlet seemed to fall into a deep study over the dead man, and the two girls, wonderfully alike even in the poor light, watched him from a little distance with wedded hands.

The Nevada detective seemed to see some wonderful change to be brought about by the death of Romeo. The designs of Bowie Bart threatened rebellion, and rebellion meant the opening of the bonanza secret to the world and the final victory of the 'Frisco league.

At that moment the famous sleuth of the mines would have given much if King Romeo were king still.

All at once he set the lamp down and stepped back.

"May I ask you girls to retire for a moment?" he said turning to the two fair and silent spectators of his action. "Go to your cabin, Madge, both of you, and come back any time at the end of thirty minutes."

The Queen of Puzzle Bar gave him a look of wonder but did not put in a remonstrance.

"We will go," she replied taking Laura's hand. "We will remain away an hour or till morning if you wish it, Captain Owlet."

"Till to-morrow then," was the answer, and the two girls left Owlet alone with the dead.

No sooner had they gone than he sprung forward and began to search the bed with eager hands. He let nothing escape him, his hands were everywhere. Not only did he search the couch, but the cabin also.

"I guess he left no commands," he murmured. "He used to say, he's told me a thousand times, that he'd do it when he found he was going to death's counter with his life chips. But here he has died without doing anything of the kind. He had hopes o' getting well, and mebbe death struck 'im kind o' sudden. Well, thar must be orders o' some kind, we don't want a rebellion now—not after what has just occurred. The secret won't be safe with a thing o' that kind under way and I'm sworn to keep it safe regardless o' consequences!"

Five minutes later Old Owlet was seated at the little table in the cabin. There was a serious look in his deep set eyes.

Before him were some rude writing materials which he had fished up from a heavy chest which he had found under King Romeo's floor.

"I've got to take the bull by the horns, and I do it for the salvation o' Puzzle Bar. Nothin' else will save it."

These words passed his lips as he bent, pen in hand, over the paper which he had spread before him.

After that Owlet went to work, and for the next few minutes his pen moved back and forth over the sheet.

"Thar! that saves or fails!" he ejaculated holding the writing away and reading it with a perceptible movement of the lips. "It's a lie, but what of it? It is policy!" And for the second time, with a growing look of satisfaction, Old Owlet read what he had written as follows:

"TO THE PARDS OF PUZZLE BAR!

"FROM THE KING.

"Being near death by the hand of a base assassin, I, Romeo, master of the Bonanza Mine and King of Puzzle Bar, do issue my last command to the loyal pards as follows:

"First: I command that the succession be kept true to the sworn constitution, first Nevada Nat, second Gold Grip, and so on down.

"Second: I intrust to our safe guard Owlet the

duty of carrying out these commands, and I call upon all who are loyal to obey him. I give him, over my last signature, until the succession is settled, all the power held to this time by me.

"Let him be obeyed. No quarrels, no rebellion for the crown of Puzzle Bar."

It was not singular that Owlet the sleuth should read his work with glittering eyes. The forged signature was still moist when he reached the bottom of it for the second time.

"That'll trip Bowie Bart, but it will not save Nevada Nat. He can be tried all the same and swing. After him Gold Grip, but I am the real monarch now."

The man rose and put the writing materials away, then with the paper under his coat he went to the door. As he opened it he saw a figure step forward, and the next moment an arm went up covering him with a revolver behind which glittered two cool, mischievous eyes.

"Take from your bosom and tear up what you have written or fall across King Romeo with a bullet in your brain!" hissed a voice.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE KING-MAKER.

OLD OWLET did not have to lean forward to see who the speaker was.

Bowie Bart the would-be king of the mine stood before him, and the hand that was thrust forward held the heavy six-shooter in a steady grip.

"The paper! out with it and tear it to pieces," came over the weapon in tones which told that the speaker was growing impatient.

The cool sleuth of the camp made no move.

"It is in the pocket on the left side, Captain Owlet," continued Bart. "Failin' to find any commands, I guess you wrote 'em to suit yourself. We don't intend to stand any foolishness over the succession. Come, Owlet. Go to work. I'm gettin' kind o' nervous."

Which was not true, as Bowie Bart's grin attested for his nerves were as steady as ever.

Old Owlet knew his man.

There was but one thing to do, and that was to comply with the request which had come over the leveled pistol.

Shutting his teeth hard the ferret of Puzzle Bar thrust one hand beneath his coat and drew out the document which had just cost him a good deal of labor.

The next moment he tore it in twain, and then again and again, the pieces falling in little showers of white at his feet.

All the time the revolver in his front did not deviate a hair's breadth.

"I guess that satisfies you!" grated Owlet, looking up into Bowie Bart's face.

"As far as it goes," was the answer. "You don't want to interfere with any subsequent proceedings. There is a clause in the constitution of Puzzle Bar which gives to its citizens the fixing of the succession under certain circumstances."

"In the absence of any proclamation by the king; I know that."

"Well, there is no proclamation," and Bart glanced with a grin at the bits of paper on the ground.

Owlet said nothing. He saw the drift of the gold sport's game.

"Very well," he thought. "If he beats me in the end I'll submit."

"We can't afford to have any dissensions," continued Bowie Bart. "A majority of the boys have selected their master. They will speak to-morrow. Now, good-night, Owlet."

Old Owlet saw the man turn coolly on his heel and walk away.

His eyes followed him with looks of madness until he disappeared.

"Beaten for the first time, and by a man I have always despised!" came over his lip as he left the cabin. "He has set his pins to be King of Puzzle Bar. It has been the dream of Bowie Bart's life, and I think I know what makes him so anxious."

Old Owlet walked rapidly from the cabin, but not after Bart, who had gone toward the Golden Fleece.

He came soon to Gold Grip's shanty, and his advent over the threshold was in the nature of a surprise.

"Are you afraid?" was the question with which Owlet startled the man who looked up at him coming.

"Afraid? What do you mean?"

The sleuth of Puzzle Bar dropped upon a stool and looked into Gold Grip's eye.

"You are king of the bonanza mine," he went on. "Nevada Nat can't succeed King Romeo, for he is under a charge that will lengthen his neck probably before to-morrow night. There are signs of rebellion in camp. The biggest rascal in it thinks he sees his chance to win the place he has coveted ever since he linked his fortunes to the secret. I mean Bowie Bart."

There was a slight start on Gold Grip's part.

Did he fear the usurper?

"I am against that man—against him to the bitter end," Owlet went on. "Let him become master, and the secret won't last six months longer. It is safer to-night, safer in one sense

than it ever has been. I am going to keep it so if I have to resort to the trigger. Now."

He seemed to approach Gold Grip though he did not move.

"You must play king in more than name," he continued. "You must assert your title right away and before the pretender makes another move."

"Then he has made one?"

"Yes," hissed Owlet through his teeth. "You have paper and pens here. Get them out. You write your proclamation and I will post it at the Golden Fleece!"

Gold Grip seemed to hesitate.

"Romeo may have left commands," he said.

"But he did not. He died without an uttered or a written wish."

"Are you sure of that?"

"I am. I have just come from the corpse. What makes you hold back, Gold Grip?"

"I saw the dead before you reached the cabin," was the reply.

"Well?"

"I searched for certain writings which I expected to find."

"But you found nothing."

In reply Gold Grip's hand became lost to sight in his bosom, and Owlet's eyes seemed about to quit their sockets as he waited for the hand to reappear.

"You see a man can be mistaken," Gold Grip suddenly resumed as he drew forth a paper which he began to unfold in the bonanza sleuth's presence. "I found this just where I thought it would be if it were in existence, and Romeo told me that he would not die without leaving something behind."

Owlet's impatience was fast getting the better of him while Gold Grip exhibited no haste.

"Look at that," he went on pushing the paper toward Owlet. "It is short and is soon read. You will see that he reaches the point with no waste of words, for he was dying when he wrote it."

Already Owlet with eager eyes was devouring the pencil scrawl before him, watched eagerly by Gold Grip at whose mouth lurked the shadow of a smile.

"Heavens! do you think he meant it?" suddenly exclaimed Owlet, falling back and giving his companion a look of blank astonishment.

"He meant everything he did," was the quiet answer.

"But this—this! why, it is the ruin of Puzzle Bar. We might as well throw the secret at once into the hands of the man Colonel Bolt has sent after it. He ignores you, don't you see? He has issued a command which he knew was not just, for he impresses us with the fact that it comes from a dying man and as such should be obeyed without quibble. I say no to anything of this kind. How does it sound to you? Listen."

And the next moment Old Owlet read the following:

"AN ORDER (THE LAST, FROM THE KING:

"King Romeo from his death-bed commands that Bowie Bart be regarded as the next in the line of succession, because Nevada Nat has fled with a charge against him, and Gold Grip is his brother. Let the last command of the king be unalterable law."

"Thar it is! He was out o' his head when he wrote that," exclaimed Owlet looking up.

"So he acknowledges on his death-bed that you are his brother?"

"Yes."

"I've suspected that more than once, but it was none o' my business," was the answer.

"War thar any more o' you?"

"There were three."

"What's become o' the other?"

Gold Grip threw a swift glance toward the door, but it did not open to admit the third one, Volcano Van.

"I don't know where he is just now," he said, avoiding Old Owlet's piercing eyes. "But never mind; that paper is the last command of King Romeo."

"And you are willing to carry it out?"

"Yes."

A frown made still darker the bronze face of the Cerberus of the secret.

"I am not, and it shall not be carried out!" he exclaimed, rising to his feet. "Get out your writing materials. This command won't do! And to Gold Grip's consternation he thrust it into the flame of the lamp on the table."

Gold Grip sprung forward with a cry, but the hand of Owlet clutched his wrist and held him back.

"Keep off!" he cried, showing a countenance like a maddened tiger's. "I want no quarrel with you. Old Owlet was sworn to one thing when he entered the service of the Banded Seven, and that was to guard the secret of the mine."

Meanwhile the last command of King Romeo was being consumed, and the menace of a human eye coupled with the strength of a giant hand was keeping Gold Grip back.

"There is no authority for Bowie Bart's crowning now!" laughed Owlet as the burnt remains of the document fell from his fingers. "We will have a new order and you will pen it."

"Never!" cried Gold Grip.

"Then go and stand at the door."

Owlet dropped the wrist he had held, but the sport of Puzzle Bar did not leave his tracks.

"I wrote a proclamation awhile ago, but I had to destroy it before a revolver," the bonanza sleuth went on. "The next one stays! If you won't write it, I will. What is your decision?"

"Will it keep back rebellion?" asked Gold Grip.

"It will do nothing less. It will nip in the bud the work of a man who can never be king of all Puzzle Bar even though he should reach the position by right. Place Bowie Bart over us and a dozen men will leave before to-morrow night. And the secret will be carried to the four quarters of America."

Gold Grip went toward a chest in one corner of the cabin.

"I'll keep the other papers till they're needed!" he ejaculated under his breath. "The time will come for them."

When he came back to the table he had writing materials in his hands and Owlet's eyes got a gleam of satisfaction.

The result of the next ten minutes was a proclamation by Gold Grip assuming the mastership of Puzzle Bar, and calling on all loyal people to support him.

Old Owlet watched him with eagerness till he dashed his signature across the bottom of the page; then his lips fell apart with an ejaculation of joy.

"I'll attend to the balance!" he cried, snatching up the document almost before it was dry. "You'll know before long that you're master byer not in name only, but in reality."

While he spoke he rushed out, cleared the space between cabin and Square with a few bounds, and walked triumphantly into the Golden Fleece.

Without a word he walked around the counter, placed the paper against the wall, and pinned it there with a bowie!

"King Romeo's last command makes Gold Grip king. That is the new master's proclamation," he said to the crowd staring at his work.

Then he quietly called for a drink.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

OWLET OR CALIBAN?

THERE was one man in the Golden Fleece at the time who was amazed at Owlet's coolness and unexpected action.

This person shut his teeth hard when he saw the mountain sleuth pin the proclamation to the wall, but he did not object until Owlet had washed down his drink and departed.

"I presume we have to submit to everything!" he exclaimed, coming forward, for during Owlet's brief sojourn at the saloon he had kept in the background. "Gold Grip proclaims himself master when he is not only not in the direct line o' succession, but when he has just harbored a spy whose mission is to break up Puzzle Bar. I would like to see Romeo's last will. Owlet said that it proclaimed Gold Grip king o' Puzzle Bar, but whar is it? Why ain't it thar beside Gold Grip's proclamation? I'll tell you why," and Bowie Bart showed the silent crowd a pair of flashing eyes.

"Thar ain't any last commands!" he cried.

These words were received with some degree of enthusiasm.

"The man what harbors the 'Frisco ferret has no right to assume authority as he stands before us. If he had not stepped between Volcano Van an' the noose, thar might be some excuse for a proceedin' o' this kind, but as it is thar's none. Nevada Nat, who stands next to Romeo, can't be master because the charge o' murder stands ag'in him. Shall we respect that assumption o' power? Shall Puzzle Bar see king a man who may want to elevate the bonanza's worst enemy to the position o' crown prince?"

There was an outburst of negative ejaculations, but not from all of the crowd.

Bowie Bart's eyes singled out those whose lips had not parted.

He saw that he had carried more than one-half of the pards with him, and when he invited the crowd to drink at his expense, nearly all approached the bar and took advantage of his liberality.

Meantime a man outside had heard Bowie Bart's outburst of remonstrance. Old Owlet, as if he had expected something of the kind, had stopped near the Golden Fleece, and with a smile at his lips, had heard every word.

"Bart has the crowd with him!" he ejaculated under his breath. "Gold Grip hurt himself with the boys when he took sides with Volcano Van. I could go back thar an' turn the tide by tellin' 'em that Gold Grip an' Romeo an' brothers, but I won't do that. I'll turn it by another play. Play king for a little while, Bowie Bart. The crown o' this bonanza camp will never sit on your head. Not while Old Owlet is capable o' keepin' it away."

Owlet left Bart and his rebellious pards to themselves and walked away.

On his way through camp he stopped and looked in at Nevada Nat's window.

"He'd better be fixing for his defense," he muttered, seeing the figure stretched on the cot in the lamplight. "Of course it'll be a packed jury, with not a bit o' show for him, for Bart

has a crown in his head, and he'll let no heir escape."

At one time Owlet seemed on the point of entering Nat's hut, but he conquered the impulse, and went on.

"I've got a curiosity to see what became of him!" he ejaculated when some time later he went through the camp in the starlight.

He carried a lot of rope across his shoulder, and moved toward that portion of the country where we saw him once, and only once, with Caliban the dwarf for a prisoner.

Owlet had not visited the place since.

When the hunchback dropped from his hands into the depths of Fools' Shaft, he turned away fully believing that he had put an end to the person who had wielded the dagger against him.

He had not apologized to Nevada Nat for suspecting him of the crime. He did not intend to apologize, for Owlet, as we know, admitted no mistakes.

He kept on until he reached the gaping shaft whose depths he could not penetrate. The silence and the darkness of the grave came up from the bottom.

Near by lay a heavy pole which, as a part of the old machinery, had had its day, and had been left to rot by the disappointed miners.

Old Owlet took it up and placed it across the shaft, then he fixed one end of his rope to the center and let the bulk of it drop into the chasm.

Nobody had visited Fools' Shaft for years. It had cost a good deal of hard work and had yielded nothing; the miners shunned it on account of its exasperating memories, and Owlet knew that, as Caliban's tomb, its solitude would never be disturbed.

When he had dropped the rope into the shaft he crawled out on the wooden beam and lowered himself fearlessly on the strong cord.

Down he went, hand over hand. All at once he struck a lot of limbs, and masses of leaves and branches brushed his face.

"What does this mean?" cried Owlet. "There were no trees here when we abandoned Fools' Shaft. They have grown out of the rocks since. Who would have thought of this?"

He paused in his descent and felt a network of boughs around him.

"Could these limbs have stopped Caliban?" he mentally exclaimed. "No! if they had, the toad would have hunted me up with another poniard."

Astonishment was depicted in Owlet's eyes as he fought his way through the limbs. He had seen good-sized trees thrive in the rocks of cliffs, but never before in a shaft. However, believing that those through which he was passing had not stopped Caliban in his descent, he kept on down.

At last the limbs grew less impeding, and when Owlet found himself clear of them, he uttered an ejaculation of joy.

He found the bottom of the shaft littered with a lot of mining machinery just as the men of Puzzle Bar had left it when the disappointing operation came to an end.

Much of it was overgrown with a rank grass that thrives in the dark, and some timbers were ready to fall to pieces from sheer rotteness.

Old Owlet, with a little dark lantern searched the spot for the body of the dwarf, but it was not there.

He threw his light into every crevice of the place, but Caliban did not reward him.

All at once he stopped and drew back.

Before him in the soft top of the ground was a distinct footprint.

Owlet held his bull's-eye close, and stared at it like a man thoroughly amazed.

"Caliban's, by the gods!" he suddenly exclaimed. "How did the toad get down here with life in his carcass? A feather would go through the limbs above, then how can they stop a human falling headlong through space—thrown from my hands, too?"

Owlet drew a revolver and followed the footprints that went before the one he had discovered.

They led him toward the main chambers of the abandoned mine, and were visible in the long, undisturbed dust which covered the floor of the corridor.

Several days had passed since his adventure with Caliban.

During the time Romeo had died and Lura had come to Puzzle Bar. Caliban had no rival now, but he had an enemy who would give him no rest if he lived, and that enemy was the bonanza sleuth.

Owlet searched the main chamber; the trail led across it and he went on.

Suddenly he stopped and shut off the light of his lantern.

Distinctly to his ears came the sound of blows against an echoing wall.

"By Jehu! it is Red Crest at his fruitless task!" cried Owlet as he listened. "The old Navajo has forgotten my dealings with the Frisco spy who found him at work, and has gone back to his labors. I wonder if Caliban the toad heard the red miner when he got here?"

"Caliban heard him, Captain Owlet!"

The sleuth of Puzzle Bar wheeled as if a snake had hissed at his heel.

The words clearly spoken seemed to have emanated from a spot very near. They had been spoken with startling emphasis; and while the voice had an unnatural sound, Owlet knew it was the dwarf's.

After all the toad of Puzzle Bar was not dead. By some means he had escaped in his descent of the shaft, and the watch-dog of the mountain bonanza had found him in the depths of the mine in which he had discovered no avenue to freedom.

Owlet could imagine Caliban famished after his enforced fast; he could see him leaning against the wall for support like a starved wolf, or a fasting brave.

He raised his lantern and put his finger on the spring that moved the slide, but there he hesitated.

What if Caliban was waiting for light for some movement? What if, panther-like, he was crouching for a leap that would sink his skeleton fingers into his enemy's throat?

Owlet judiciously drew back. The movement was accompanied with no noise, and when he stepped out from the wall the slide slipped off the bull's-eye.

For a moment he saw nothing where he expected to find the dwarf, but all at once his eye caught sight of the toad of Puzzle Bar.

Touching the wall with one shoulder, and with his hideous body bent forward stood Caliban. His eyes seemed on fire, and his pinched features bore the marks of starvation. A grin added to his grotesqueness when he saw the light of Owlet's lantern playing on him and the wall.

"I knew you would come!" he suddenly laughed. "That is why I have waited here."

"You could not get out!" was the answer. "The old mine is a trap that lets no rats go. But, in heaven's name, how did you get here alive?"

"The trees! you did not think of them."

"I knew nothing about 'em," replied Owlet, biting his lip. "Well, they stopped you, I see; they gave you a chance to explore the shaft that gave us no gold for our trouble."

"Abandoned too soon, Captain Owlet."

"How is that?" cried the bonanza sleuth leaning forward.

"You gave up the shaft when you were at its wealth," the dwarf went on.

"Oh, you can't play that game, Caliban!" laughed Owlet. "You can't buy your way out, not since your last blow succeeded."

A strange ejaculation came from Caliban's throat. He took two bounds forward before Owlet could throw up his revolver.

"He is dead then?" he cried. "The king of Puzzle Bar is out of Caliban's way! Ha! ha! hurrah for that. Look out, Captain Owlet."

The next second something shot toward the bonanza sleuth like a missile from a catapult. There was no escape from it; the collision was unavoidable.

All at once up went Owlet's lantern to be hurled twenty feet away, and the next moment he was pressed against the damp wall of the chamber by a strength that seemed superhuman.

"My God! I am in the clutches of a toad turned devil!" burst from Owlet's throat, as he exerted himself to tear the incubus loose. "I can't afford to let Caliban gain a victory here. The bonanza secret is not yet safe. Without me Bowie Bart will succeed in his rebellion, and the secret will reach the world. Oh, you rascal! oh, you toad with a dozen lives! Where is your windpipe for Owlet's grip?"

It was a wild struggle that followed in the darkness, for the lantern had gone out, and the only sounds that prevailed came from the throats of the wrestling twain.

Caliban may have been starved, but he was still wiry and strong.

At last the struggle grew still.

Who had conquered—Owlet or Caliban?

CHAPTER XXIX.

A TURN IN THE TRAIL.

WHAT motive had Old Owlet for prying into Caliban's fate?

Was he afraid that by some interposition of fortune, the hunchback of Puzzle Bar had escaped the death to which he had been hurled down Fools' Shaft?

Owlet had a motive, but when in the gloom of the underground chamber he felt the vise-like clutch of Caliban at his throat—two demon hands which he could not loosen with all his power—he probably wished himself on the solid ground above.

When the struggle had grown still a human figure tottered along the wall, gasping as it went as if breath was as scarce as precious.

"I'd go back and hold the toad an hour if I thought that was a chance for him!" muttered this person. "I don't want to take any risks. I can't afford to. Let him go. I'm glad to get off as I am."

The man was Owlet, who by the skin of his teeth, as it were, had come out of the conflict with his life.

"I'd like to get my hand under his jacket just for a minute," he went on, still talking to himself. "I think the fellow carries a secret thar. I'm almost sure he does. I didn't know much about it when I tossed him down the shaft, but some singular things have happened in camp

since then. I'll go back to my rope and hunt the upper air. Let the toad go. One o' these days, if he remains here, he'll give up the secret."

Owlet groped his way back to the shaft where he found his rope where he had left it.

"Hark!" he suddenly exclaimed. "That was a step behind me. I barely heard it, but it was a step all the same."

The Nevada sleuth had lost revolver and knife in the tussle with Caliban, and the thought that the vicious dwarf was stealing upon him through the darkness was not very reassuring.

For several seconds, with his hands on the rope, he waited and listened.

"I might be fooled. I hope I am," he ejaculated. "I don't hear Red Crest's pick any more either. Nor Volcano Van's voice," he laughed. "No, nor Volcano Van!"

The next moment the mountain detective caught the rope with both hands and began the ascent.

The shaft was not wide and he could touch the walls with his feet as he went up. This greatly assisted him and he made good progress hand over hand.

"Somebody's beneath me!" he suddenly cried. "As I live, I am not the only person on this rope."

The thought made Owlet grate his teeth. He leaned over the abyss and looked down, but all was dark and he saw nothing.

Still this did not prevent him from feeling another weight on the rope, and he knew that while he was climbing upward another was doing the same.

Oh, for a knife to cut the rope between him and his pursuer.

Old Owlet kept on; he passed the limbs which he now knew had miraculously preserved Caliban's life, and then pressed with all his might over the home stretch.

His intentions were to wrench the wooden beam from its position when he reached the upper ground and again send the dwarf to the bottom of the shaft.

It was an exciting race for the top of the shaft, but Owlet had the advantage, and he pressed it with all his might.

When he touched the beam he could not keep back a cry of triumph. Winding his hand over it, he drew himself out of the pit and landed on the ground at the dark edge.

"Now, my mountain toad!" he cried, seizing the beam. "You've not got out of the woods, for Old Owlet has the everlasting call on the stakes."

Then he raised the beam and pushed it toward the middle of the abyss with all his might.

"Thar! down you go!"

The next moment the pole toppled over the chasm, but ere it disappeared, a figure leaped out and darted away with a devilish laugh.

Owlet stood spellbound.

He had been an instant too late, for Caliban had effected his escape and was bounding away like a deer!

"Hades an' horns!" burst from Owlet's throat. "The deformed villain is on top o' ground again, an' he's likely to give somebody trouble. Well, he'll get no compromise out o' me, an' if he wants to keep a whole skin he wants to keep out o' my road. He'll bother Madge now. He took Romeo's life because the girl decided in his favor. She must know at once that the hunchback is on deck."

When Owlet left the shaft he went toward Madge's cabin.

The girl met him at the door.

"You want to be on the lookout," he said.

"The toad of Puzzle Bar is back."

The news startled the girl.

"You have seen him?" she asked.

"I have."

"Where is he?"

"Probably in camp."

A smile brightened Madge's face.

"I presume you wouldn't like to let me get my hands on him?" she answered.

"Why not, Madge?"

"You know what is likely to take place tomorrow. The men may decide to try Nevada Nat for the killing of King Romeo. The man is innocent. You know it, Owlet."

The sleuth of the camp made no reply.

"You once hunted Nat down for the crime," Madge went on, leaning toward him until he saw her eyes riveted on his face. "You have a reputation for never accusing the wrong person, but you must admit failure for once. You know who the guilty one is; you have just warned me to beware of him."

Owlet seemed about to draw back and desert the girl.

"I want Caliban," she continued. "The innocent is not going to suffer for the guilty. I know that Gold Grip has issued his proclamation as King of Puzzle Bar. I can appeal to him."

"You might appeal to the wrong person, Madge."

"Then I will play the hand that suits me best. Where have you been for the last hour? Don't you know what has happened within that time?"

Owlet said "no" mechanically.

"Come in," resumed the girl, holding wide the door of her cabin. "Lura isn't with me now."

Owlet's answer was a stare, for he saw that they were the only tenants of the shanty.

"I left you girls together," he exclaimed.

"So you did, Owlet, and until a little while ago Lura was my companion. But Puzzle Bar is a place where one event follows another in bewildering succession."

"For heaven's sake, come down to business," cried Owlet, burning with impatience. "What has happened during my absence?"

Nevada Madge seemed to take delight in mentally torturing him.

"If you don't tell me I'll find out elsewhere!" he exclaimed.

"Patience, patience, Owlet. I never saw you in such a stew before. Lura has gone back to 'Frisco."

Owlet uttered a cry.

"She'll never get thrar with the wounded Utah tiger to take her trail."

"I beg your pardon," smiled Madge. "There is no wounded Utah tiger."

"Why not?"

"Because Mormon Mort is dead!"

"What! did Lura finish him when she shot through the door?" cried Owlet.

"No. Frijo Frank, his confederate, dragged him away and wanted to save him by keeping him out of Puzzle Bar. He was not wounded badly; a shot through the shoulder—that was all. Well, Mormon Mort, crazy with rage, came back for vengeance, while Frijo Frank, who thought he had served the rascal long enough, turned his back on him."

"Well, what happened next?"

"The Mormon came into camp with the noise of a crippled lion. He found the cabin—Romeo's, I mean—and broke in the door. Lura was not there. Then he began a search for her, and so bunglingly was it conducted, his wound and anger getting the best of him, that he was caught by Bowie Bart and two other men who happened to bear him. Mormon Mort struggled till he broke from their grip, and as he ran the three fired, all at once."

"A poor chance he had!" answered Owlet.

"You may well say that," was the reply.

"Mormon Mort fell dead before the revolvers of Bowie Bart and his companions, and the corpse is lying under the gallows-tree in the Square."

"He deserved nothing better, after all!" grated Owlet. "I suppose the outcome pleased Lura?"

"She did not rejoice. Shortly after the shooting she encountered Volcano Van—"

"No!" interrupted Owlet. "She did not meet the 'Frisco spy. She could not. That were impossible."

"Perhaps you think so," replied Madge, smiling. "I know, however, that the two met, and that they are now on the way back."

Old Owlet stood before the girl like a man in a maze.

"I say it cannot be!" he exclaimed. "Why, if Volcano Van leaves Puzzle Bar, he does so with the bonanza secret."

"Then it is gone!"

"I won't believe it!"

"Go and see for yourself!"

"I will! Some men have doubles, and this 'Frisco spy has one."

"I called him Volcano Van."

"Then you saw him?"

"I did."

"And you were willing to let him take the secret away?"

"I did not think of it. Lura wanted to go back, and under his protection, too. She tried to keep him from coming hither, and of course she would not want him to stay."

Owlet left the girl without an answer.

"One moment," called Madge after him.

"Will you help catch Caliban for me?"

"For to-morrow?"

"Yes."

"I may not be here to-morrow," was the answer.

"Don't you want to bury the man you have served?"

"King Romeo?" came through Owlet's teeth. "He can be put under the mountain sod without my help. I attend to the living, and while the bonanza secret is in danger I have nothing to do with the dead!"

Owlet was bounding away with the last words falling from his lips.

He went through the gold-camp like a man with a dozen red-skins at his heels. He appeared among the rocks and bushes in the suburbs, and then was lost to sight.

Some time later he reappeared in an underground cavern, whose floor was covered with pieces of rock.

Owlet held a little torch over his head.

"Thar's no Red Crest here!" he cried, as he found a broken staple in the stone wall. "Our Navajo eagle has escaped at last."

Then he went down a narrow corridor, and threw the light of his torch upon a stone which lay against the right-hand wall.

"Madge was right!" he cried. "I take the trail to 'Frisco!"

CHAPTER XXX.

BROKEN BARS.

If Volcano Van was on the road to 'Frisco then the bonanza secret was not safe.

Let us see.

The reader will recollect that we left the nabob's spy in the chamber occupied by the captive Navajo whose zeal in the hunt for the well-guarded mine had made him a prisoner chained to the bonanza's wall.

Volcano Van's trailing of Old Owlet had led him to the secret mine and into a trap as well, for the mountain sleuth knew all the time that the trailer was at his heels.

It was after Owlet's rejection of the challenge to fight a duel in the cavern for the possession of the secret, that Volcano Van found himself suddenly face to face with the bonanza sleuth whose two revolvers covered his breast.

Behind the Californian lay a corridor through which a man could walk with some ease. Into this place he was forced by the leveled revolvers, and a short march brought him to a smaller chamber with no outlet save the one by which he had reached it.

A dark lantern fastened to Owlet's belt had afforded light for this play and when the Californian had been marched to the new chamber, he was abruptly deserted by the sleuth.

"You will keep Red Crest company for awhile," ejaculated Owlet.

"The sound of the red fool's never-ending work will ring in your ears until you will wish it a thousand miles beneath you. This cave is to be your abode, Volcano Van, until the hand of Owlet chooses to open the doors and that will never be. Colonel Bolt sent you to find the bonanza of Puzzle Bar. Behold it! You stand beneath the roof of one of the gold-chambers; you have kept a part of your agreement; you have found the mine, but the other part—the report and the diagram—will never be fulfilled."

Volcano Van made no reply, but watched the glare of the bull's-eye disappear down the narrow passage he had just traversed.

All at once he started forward.

"I don't perish here like a penned wolf!" fell from his lips. "I will force the sleuth of Nevada to fight for the secret."

He reached the mouth of the corridor as a crash struck his ears, and the next moment the entrance was completely blocked by a boulder which had fallen from above!

Another second and he would have been crushed!

Neither around nor over the rock was there passage for a human body, and the Californian found himself in a living tomb!

After awhile he heard the chained Indian at work. Blow after blow struck the echoing wall, and Volcano Van imagined that Red Crest was attacking it with more than usual ferocity.

The interior of his prison was dark, but some bunched matches relieved the gloom and showed him the bare walls, and the rock which had fallen in his path.

Above the boulder was a small opening, through which he could see the light by which the Indian worked. Now and then he thought he caught sight of the busy pick, but no part of the red-skin's body was to be seen.

Minutes were hours to the Californian penned up in the mine.

He examined the walls of his prison again and again, but always with the same result; he found no avenue of escape.

All at once the sounds in the Indian's chamber changed in tone.

Volcano Van sprang to the blocked mouth of the corridor and listened.

What did it mean?

Mingled with the blows which he heard was a sound of assaulted steel.

What was the Indian doing?

If he could have looked into the cavern where the lamp rested against the wall he would have seen Red Crest at work, but not at the spot where he had been trying to pick his way to liberty through solid rock.

With all his strength, and with the blaze of demonism in his eyes, the Navajo was attacking the heavy chain which held him to the wall.

Already the links bore scars of the pick, but the blows had effected nothing. Now the Indian was assaulting the chain and the staple, more especially the latter, as if he would dig it out of the stone.

It was like a Cyclops at work. He never paused for breath, but rained his blows against the object of his attack with all his might.

If Volcano Van could have seen the red giant he would have taken hope.

For a full hour it was thus; then the attack ceased as suddenly as it had begun.

With a savage ejaculation of delight, Red Crest threw the pick at his feet and sprang to the middle of the chamber, dragging after him his manacle and chain.

No longer was he fastened to the wall!

"By Jove!" cried Volcano Van who saw the giant figure of the Navajo rise before him far away. "As I live! the red eagle is free!"

Suddenly Red Crest stooped and caught up his chain, then he regained his pick and took the lamp from the wall.

There was a wild light in his eyes.

"He hasn't forgotten me!" eagerly cried the Californian who, watching over the top of the boulder that made him a prisoner saw the corridor darkened by the Navajo's figure.

In a little while he heard an exclamation of surprise just beyond the stone.

"White man alive?" asked the Indian.

"I am here!" was the quick response. "You are free, Red Crest?"

"The eagle of the Navajoes has cut the bars of his cage. He will go back to his people and then turn on the gold vultures of the mountains. It would be better for them if they had killed the eagle when the trap caught him. Does the white man want out?"

"Does any one want to die in a place like this?" exclaimed Volcano Van.

"Let him see what Red Crest can do. The rock is heavy, but the Indian is strong."

Situated as he was the Californian could lend the Navajo but little assistance. He could do little more than stand back, and let the chief do all the work.

Red Crest went to work with all his might. The pick could not be used in the narrow corridor, and the Indian searched the mines until he found an iron bar with which he came back to the task.

With the strength of a Hercules he pried the boulder back against the right hand wall, he moved it inch by inch, working till the veins in his forehead seemed ready to burst.

At last he held it back, putting all his strength in the effort.

"Now let the white man be a weasel!" he exclaimed. "Red Crest has done his best. He can move the rock no further, and the pale-face must slip out or perish."

Volcano Van did not hesitate to try the perilous passage. His life depended on his success, and when he saw the red giant straining every nerve with the iron bar he wormed his body into the narrow way.

It was the tightest work of his life and the most dangerous.

If the Indian's muscle failed him, if the iron bar gave, he would be crushed.

But one look into Red Crest's face, one glance at the glued lips and the steel nerves reassured the 'Frisco spy.

Inch by inch he made his way between the boulder and the wall, and when the Indian moved and the rock fell back he was free!

For a moment neither spoke.

"Come! the eagle of the Navajos is going to the skies!" suddenly ejaculated the Indian.

"Does the white man want to stay here?"

"No! I have the secret!" cried Van. "I can afford to go back now."

Red Crest gave him a quick, inquisitive look.

"Where did the white face come from?"

"From San Francisco."

"For the secret of the mountain mine?"

"Yes."

Volcano Van thought he saw a faint smile grow into existence at the Indian's mouth.

"A red fool and a white one!" exclaimed Red Crest. "But the Navajo will throw the secret to the wind, when he reaches his people. They will come down upon the gold men like a storm in winter."

"Wait till I report. Give me a chance to tell the 'Frisco league that I have the secret. The gold men will not escape."

"The chief called Owlet will follow us."

"Let him! If he follows you he will fall into the traps of the Navajoes."

"Which are traps of death!" hissed the Indian, drawing back. "He goes to the mountain with his chain. The fires of the Navajoes will burn it off! Let the white man go to 'Frisco with what he knows about the mine. When he sends Red Crest a message, the Navajo storm will destroy the gold-camp."

Not long afterward Volcano Van stood in the starlight that showed the silent camp with beauty.

The Indian held out his hand, and with a hearty pressure which told that they were forever friends, the two went in opposite directions.

Volcano Van walked toward Gold Grip's cabin.

"One word with him and then for 'Frisco!" he murmured.

On his way he reached Madge's abode, and a voice on the inside sent a thrill to his heart.

It was a voice he had last heard in 'Frisco and in Colonel Bolt's palace of luxury. A moment later he opened the cabin door and presented himself to the astonished girls. Lura Bolt was before him, as beautiful as when she threw herself before her father and begged him not to send a third man to perish for the secret of the bonanza mine.

Thirty minutes later Volcano Van was the companion and escort of a young girl who rode a horse from Puzzle Bar.

It was their intention to reach the railroad at a certain mining-town a good long ride away, and when the Californian looked into Lura's beaming eyes he felt that he was taking back to 'Frisco something more valuable than the secret of the mine.

Already Bowie Bart and his companions had finished the career of Mormon Mort, and while

Volcano Van and the banker's ward rode down the mountain trail the sleepless guard of the mine was making preparations to play a hand that could not fail.

'Frisco was far away and Old Owlet was still in the path.

It was midnight when a stern-faced man laid his hand on Bowie Bart's shoulder and whispered:

"I'm goin' away. No assumption of power till I come back. I can kill kings as well as make 'em!" And the astonished sport saw him ride off.

CHAPTER XXXI. THE TRIAL FOR LIFE.

"You had better stay, Captain Owlet. Something might happen while you're gone!" laughed Bowie Bart as he watched Owlet disappear. "I've seen you make kings, but by Jove! I never saw you kill any. You can't play Warwick at your notion in this camp if I say no. You'd better not go, captain, but if you think I'm going to stand back at your command a bigger fool than you never galloped from Puzzle Bar."

Owlet might not have left the bonanza camp when he did if he had known that the proclamation of Gold Grip which we have seen him post at the Golden Fleece was there no longer.

He did not know that a man had entered the saloon and taken down the document. The doer of this act was Bowie Bart himself, and it was the first act of the assumption of power against which Owlet had just warned him.

The few men who witnessed Bowie Bart's act put in no voice of disapproval.

In fact, the would-be usurper had the camp at his back. A man charged with murder, like Nevada Nat, could not be King of Puzzle Bar, and one who had protected a spy, as Gold Grip had done, could not be trusted.

This was the prevailing sentiment while Old Owlet rode down the 'Frisco trail. He was leaving Puzzle Bar on the eve of a dangerous rebellion, with nobody to lift a hand strong enough to stem the tide.

No one? We shall see in the natural course of events.

The day as it broke again over the Nevada camp saw three men halt at Gold Grip's door.

A light knock caused it to be opened, and the miner confronted the stalwart trio at whose head was Bowie Bart.

"We've got a painful duty to perform," began Bart, as he straightened in the growing light and looked Gold Grip squarely in the face. "We've concluded that the manner of existing things in Puzzle Bar doesn't exactly suit us." Bart was trying to put things as politely as possible. "We've concluded to choose a master for ourselves till a few things are settled, and, as a committee of three from the meeting, we're hereby asking you to resign your powers thrust upon you by King Romeo's last orders."

Gold Grip seemed to smile.

Indeed, he appeared impatient for the end of Bowie Bart's long sentences.

"Nothing suits me better," he answered. "Heaven knows I want no mastership."

The three men threw astonished looks into each other's faces.

Was the rebellion to reach its ends with no more exciting scenes than this?

"We thought you didn't want the place!" remarked Bart, when he got his breath. "Mebbe we'll have to thrust the place upon somebody. You know that Nevada Nat can't succeed, for he's to be tried this day for givin' Romeo the wounds that lost him life and his crown."

The adroit sport did not tell Gold Grip how the secret meeting at the Golden Fleece had decided to proceed to harsh measures if he (Gold Grip) should refuse to resign; he said nothing about the unanimous election of himself as "King" of Puzzle Bar. No! Bowie Bart kept these things back. There had never been anything aggressive about Gold Grip. He was known for his plain, almost polished manners, and for his coolness as well.

If he had asserted his right to the "crown" of Puzzle Bar, he would have maintained it if the whole camp were arrayed against him. But he recalled one of the papers found under Romeo's cot, in which he had been shut out because he was Romeo's brother, a secret known to no one then in the camp.

Bowie Bart and his companions walked crestfallen from the cabin. Conscious of their physical strength, since the whole camp, with several exceptions, were for a new order of things, they rather hoped for a little resistance, so they could have something to put down. But here Gold Grip had quietly yielded, despite the manifesto which Owlet had rather pompously posted at the Golden Fleece.

"The runaway next. We'll have a diversion then!" exclaimed Bowie Bart, as he led the "committee" back to the whisky saloon, where the rebels awaited the report.

Gold Grip's resignation was received with cheers, and a score of dark-faced men drank Bowie Bart's health in not very clean glasses.

The sun came up through a cloudless sky, and when it was midway between the horizon and zenith, Nevada Nat found himself visited by five men.

They announced, without a waste of words, that he was to be tried at once for the murder of King Romeo, and with very little ceremony he was placed under arrest.

The handsome sport of Puzzle Bar expected this. He had already told Hilliard that he would never turn his back on the mountain camp until he had established his innocence to the satisfaction of his most persistent accuser.

But how was he to do this alone, with a packed jury under the very tree where Madge's sudden intervention had previously saved his life, and with Romeo lying unburied in his shanty?

"Lead on, gentlemen," answered Nevada Nat in quiet tones, after the arrest. "You don't find me turning my back on the Bar."

"But you did once," replied a voice, and Nat, turning upon the speaker, transfixed him with a withering glance.

"I went for a purpose, I came back for one," he replied. "Who is our king now?"

"Bowie Bart," was the response.

"Where is Gold Grip?"

"In his shanty. We don't take men who stand by 'Frisco spies."

Nevada Nat made no reply. He seemed to fathom at once and fully the meaning of the answer as it applied to him.

Under the wide-spreading boughs of the tree in the Square a bronzed group awaited the prisoner.

Mormon Mort's body was no longer there, for during the night it had been given a shallow grave on the nearest mountain.

Bowie Bart fixed his eyes upon the accused sport with a look of triumph which he had not the power to subdue. He saw in Nevada Nat a rival for the "crown" of Puzzle Bar if for nothing else.

In the midst of the crowd the prisoner drew himself up and looked at the pards.

It was no ordinary occasion; a life was enveloped in the passing hour.

"This court is opened," suddenly cried Bart, who rose from one of the rough card-tables which had been transferred from the Golden Fleece to the Square. "Nevada Nat of Puzzle Bar is accused of having stabbed to death Rough Romeo, late king of this camp. The prisoner stands before his peers, the pards of the Bar. He has heard the charge. What does he say?"

Bowie Bart did not fairly confront Nevada Nat until he uttered the last words. When they had ceased to sound the two men stood face to face.

The answer that came clearly to the ears of all was not unexpected.

Nevada Nat took a sudden step forward and throwing one hand toward the sky, seen through the leafy boughs, cried thrillingly:

"In the sight of God, not guilty!"

A strange silence followed the declaration; eye met eye, and here and there was seen a smile of derision.

"I am ready!" suddenly continued Nat. "The accusation has been made. I challenge proof."

"The prisoner shall be accommodated," and Bowie Bart stepped out from the table, his giant figure seeming to get larger still as he made the display. "The proof or a part of it consists of the dagger which after the first attack on Romeo was found under the 'Frisco spy's pillow, but no man believes that he struck the blow. That dagger was thrown upon the prisoner's table by Captain Owlet, who, as we know, never finds the wrong man."

From Bart's first word to the end of a faint smile, was at the corners of the prisoner's mouth.

"Is this your testimony?" he asked.

"It is not all. The court will prove that the prisoner and King Romeo were rivals for the love of Nevada Madge, that he said that a certain day might never dawn for Romeo, and that when Owlet accused him of the crime, he left the camp, fled like a man who flies to save his neck."

The arms of Nevada Nat left his sides at this juncture and were crossed quietly on his breast.

Just then somebody at Bowie Bart's elbow exclaimed "The girl!" and the new monarch of Puzzle Bar turned to see Madge quietly reach the inner circle.

"I didn't want her here, but that's no help for it," mentally ejaculated Bart. "I wanted the whole thing put through without her presence. I haven't forgot what she did once before; but by heaven! she doesn't repeat the trick."

For a moment the coming of Nevada Madge seemed to embarrass the packed court, but Bowie Bart beat his embarrassment back, and looked at the prisoner.

"We'll call Gold Grip himself to prove the prisoner's threats," he exclaimed. "A dozen men will swear that he was abroad the night King Romeo was stabbed, and as for the rivalry for a woman's love, there is a person present who will confirm it all."

Nearly every eye became fixed upon the girl thus singled out.

Bowie Bart had not even looked at her, but all knew whom he meant.

As for Madge she turned toward the gold-camp king and gave him a smile while a flush suddenly suffused her face.

"Do you want my testimony now?" she asked.

"Not just yet," was the reply. "We'll hear first from those who saw the prisoner abroad that night, ay, who saw him at King Romeo's very door."

"I would rather talk now," persisted Madge, and the next moment she came forward and halted in a little cleared space and not far from Nevada Nat who gave her a look of admiration and wonder.

A half-suppressed murmur ran through the twenty bronze men who made up the mountain court.

"Well, go on!" growled Bart.

All at once Madge's eyes lit up with animation.

"The prisoner came to me with words which were too late," she began. "He came after I had given my hand to King Romeo. He told me to look out for a scorpion's sting. It tried its force that very night."

"We know it!" exclaimed Bowie Bart. "That night King Romeo got the poniard sharpened to a needle's point by disappointed love."

"And in the hand of a creature half-toad, half-man!" cried Madge. "The dagger in the black sheath belonged to Caliban, and the dwarf of Puzzle Bar is the assassin! I stand his accuser before you all. The innocent lives; the guilty dies!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

MADGE'S FIGHT AGAINST FATE.

THE thrilling sentences of the young girl who faced Bowie Bart and his court were not without their effect.

This accusation of Caliban was in the nature of a surprise; nobody looked for it.

"We're not here to hear charges against another person," exclaimed Bart, the first one to disturb the silence. "We are trying Nevada Nat just now. You said, I believe, that he confessed that he loved you?"

"Do I blame him for that? No!" cried Madge, and then she moved backward toward the prisoner, who with folded arms was looking at her with an interest which took the eyes of the crowd.

"We are trying him for the death of King Romeo," resumed Bowie Bart. "The witnesses who saw him at Romeo's cabin will step to the front."

In an instant the girl's eyes flashed.

"I am not to be heard?" she exclaimed. "My charge against Caliban—"

"We can't take it. I'm sorry, Madge; the dwarf isn't hyer."

"You can wait till he is found," was the quick reply. "I think you will wait."

Already four men had advanced from the crowd and stood a little to the front, and in the middle of the Square. They were the persons who were to testify that Nevada Nat was seen at the door of King Romeo's cabin at a certain hour the night of the first attempt on his life. Madge threw a glance toward them from Bowie Bart, but the same second she turned back upon the new king.

"You are going on with the trial in spite of everything?" she asked coolly, but not without a slight trembling of the voice.

"I guess we are."

"Proceed then," she answered, and the next moment she stood at Nevada Nat's side waiting for the testimony of the four.

Bowie Bart thought he had won a victory over the girl whose appearance on the ground at one time threatened to interrupt the proceedings. Against Puzzle Bar a young creature like her could do nothing; her beauty could not arrest the condemnation and execution of the man arraigned for murder.

Madge listened quietly to the evidence as it came from the tongues of the four miners. Each one had seen Nevada Nat in front of Romeo's cabin, nothing more.

After this testimony Bowie Bart called the name of a man who stepped forward with singular haste.

"Sicorro Sam!" murmured Madge when she saw the man almost dwarfish in stature and with a pair of eyes never still for an instant. "With those eyes he ought to see everything."

It soon transpired that Sicorro Sam had seen even more than the four who had just preceded him. He had seen Nevada Nat emerge from Rough Romeo's cabin and walk rapidly toward his own.

This testimony produced a sensation. When he had given it Sicorro Sam walked back to the crowd with the air of a man who had performed some startling act.

Madge's eyes followed him.

"That man has been coached!" she cried.

"Whether he has or not, he told the truth."

The reply was spoken at her elbow and the following moment she was staring into the prisoner's face.

"You were there?" she exclaimed.

"Yes."

"Inside of the cabin?"

"Inside."

Then Nevada Nat raised his voice.

"Gentlemen, I admit the truth of the testimony just heard!" he exclaimed. "I was at

Romeo's cabin that night. I was on the inside. We had some warm words, but while I was there no blow was dealt. I went to say good-by—to will my share of the annual divide to the pards of Puzzle Bar."

A derisive smile came to Bowie Bart's lips; he threw back his head haughtily and ran one of his hands through the dark locks on his shoulders.

"I guess the prosecution can rest," he remarked. "I don't see what more is wantin', after the prisoner's confession. It seems enough to put an end to the trial. This court is closed so far as the hearing o' testimony is concerned."

"Is there to be no defense?" asked Madge.

"What's the use o' one?" was the answer. "You've heard what the prisoner has just said. He was with King Romeo that night; they had hard words, of course, about you, girl. Shortly after he left Romeo was found stabbed with a dagger, which Old Owllet, the never-failing sleuth, said belonged to Nevada Nat. By heavens! you're the most exacting woman I ever saw. The jury stands yonder, and nothing is to be done now but to wait for its verdict."

The jury was the crowd of bronzed men who had heard the proceedings, and as Bowie Bart waved his hand toward them his countenance lit up with an expression of triumph.

"I shall appeal to a higher court, if the verdict of yon jury is death, after the testimony just heard!" suddenly rung out the clear voice of Nevada Madge, as a step carried her forward. "This, in fact, is no court. Nobody has been sworn, and no legality invests its proceedings in any shape. Organized to convict, for a purpose which anybody can see, it has carried out its mission. I shall appeal to the real courts of Nevada—"

A loud laugh burst from the throat of a man in the middle of the main crowd.

"The ruffian who laughs at Nevada justice may taste it before he ends his career!" flashed Madge, as she singled the fellow out and looked him in the eye. "We know that men who have come to Puzzle Bar are exiles from justice, and it is the height of injustice to make them the jurors of a mountain court. Will Mica Marle come forward?"

The man who had laughed hung back, but all at once the hands of those nearest him were laid on his shoulders, and he was pushed forward amid the smiles of his companions.

"This man is a specimen," continued Madge, covering the big ruffian with her finger as she turned to Bowie Bart. "Here is one of your jurors, Captain Bart. Look at him. He laughed with derision when I spoke of courts of justice in Nevada. Why, I know something about Mica Marle, and I do not wonder that he thinks all courts travesties of justice."

The man standing before Madge gave her a look of intense curiosity. He suddenly lost color and seemed uneasy.

"That man was once before a court himself," resumed the girl with calmness. "He may wonder how I know, but I have not lived in Puzzle Bar all this time for nothing. Mica Marle once had a wife, a young girl who really loved him."

"What if I had?" blurted the writhing ruffian. "What has this to do with the proceedings o' this court?"

"Silence!" cried half a dozen voices in the crowd. "Give Madge a chance."

"I only want to show what kind of men form the juries of the so-called mountain courts," replied Madge. "Ah! I was talking about Mica Marle's wife! Well, the young creature got more blows than love from her husband. It went on in this way for months. One day during Mica Marle's absence the girl-wife was found dead in the mountains, her back was cut into strips, and in her hands—"

"That is false—false as perdition!" roared the mountain tough, almost white with rage. "I never had a wife. I hate women, have hated them all my life. I protest—I—"

"Gentlemen, don't you see the man from Gopher Gulch will convict himself by his vehemence if he goes on?" interrupted Madge quietly. "When he came back to the camp he was arrested for murder, but, strange to say, the jury which consisted of the camp's population promptly acquitted him. The evidence against him was overwhelming, but the child-wife never had a friend at Gopher Gulch. Why, the villains of the camp hardly granted her decent burial."

"That is against the facts!" cried Mica Marle with clinched hand.

Madge drew back with a smile of cutting derision.

"There, gentlemen, is a member of Puzzle Bar's jury," she went on. "Shall I call out any more? Or are you satisfied?"

For a moment there was no reply.

Mica Marle gradually recovered his color, but his eyes sent glances of rage at the girl who had exposed him.

"We can't accept such things in the prisoner's favor," suddenly said Bowie Bart. "Mica Marle will not vote with the rest on the prisoner's guilt."

"Because the girl has brought to light the lie of some old enemy!" cried the ruffian.

"Silence!" thundered the same chorus from the crowd. "Now, gents, you will vote," and

Bowie Bart went back to the card-table and picked up paper and pencil. "All who believe the prisoner guilty will hold up their right hands."

All at once a number of hands were elevated and the lips of the new king counted them. "Down! Now all who believe him not guilty will vote in the same manner."

A hand here and there crept up one after another until there were five.

"Eighteen against five," announced Bowie Bart. "This is the verdict o' the court. It means death accordin' to the code made an' signed a long while ago."

At the moment of this announcement Nevada Nat's arms dropped to his side.

"Where is Captain Owllet?" he asked.

"He is not here at present!" answered Bart.

"Where is Gold Grip?"

"In his shanty," said some one.

"There shall be no execution of any sentence until Owllet comes back."

The crowd looked at the speaker, and more than one eye twinkled.

"There shall be no death till Owllet comes," echoed a clear voice, and Madge appeared at the prisoner's side.

"When he comes the crime will be fixed on Caliban. The jury that has just delivered a one-sided verdict shall condemn no innocent man in my presence without giving him a chance. Mica Marle has gone back to the men with whom he associates. Why don't you force the truth from the wife-killer of Gopher Gulch? Look! his right hand is touching Restless Rube. With that hand the member of Bowie Bart's jury whipped his child wife to death."

A score of eyes were turned instantly on the singled-out ruffian, and those nearest him shrunk away.

"Give Nevada Nat two days," continued Madge. "I stand good for his appearance at the end of that time. Give me time to lay my hands on Caliban."

The crowd seemed to surge forward and a united cry went up.

"Give him the two days!" it said.

Captain Bart ground his teeth.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

OWLET ON THE TRAIL.

MEANTIME a man well mounted was riding a strong, black horse down the somewhat tortuous mountain-trail which ended at a certain camp miles away.

This person was of compact build, and filled the saddle with grace as the wind blew his black hair almost straight out behind. His feet, incased in strong boots that were covered by his dark pantaloons, filled the stirrups, and now and then the left heel pressed a spur against the steed's bowels.

It was Owllet.

From the gold-camp, which was his destination, the cars could be taken for San Francisco.

"I keep the secret safe—that's my life-work; that is what I swore to do when I entered the service of the Seven!" he remarked, addressing himself aloud as he rode along. "The Indian whom we should have killed, and not chained to the wall—that was a piece o' sentiment hatched out by Gold Grip—the Indian, I say, will go back to his people and tell a tale that will stamp him the boss liar in a red skin. I want to find Volcano Van, the man who, in spite o' me, got the secret, and who is now going back to his employers with it and the 'Frisco nabob's ward. I may not catch him this side o' Poker City; meb-be not thar; but, by heavens! I catch 'im somewhere!"

A good part of the night which had just passed Old Owllet had spent in the saddle. Nothing tired the man, nothing daunted him. He knew that he had left Puzzle Bar in a bad state; he did not believe that Bowie Bart would obey his last commands, and when he thought of the rebellious sport, his lips would meet firmly, and the flash of a vengeance to come lighted up his eyes.

It was late in the afternoon of the first day out when the hoofs of Owllet's horse struck the dust of Poker City.

It was quite a place, and the miner's shanty had given way to substantial frame buildings. The railroad ran through the middle of the town, and the depot was a hotel, in front of which was a green plot with an artificial fountain.

As Owllet rode down the street toward this place, the whistle of a locomotive came from the east.

"Just in time, if that is the 'Frisco Express," he murmured, giving his horse the spur. "I don't know anything about the new-fangled railroad card, but I know that one man won't start for the coast if he holds a ticket for the train just comin' in."

Several minutes later the bonanza sleuth rode into the little square in front of the depot hotel. His appearance was not such as to attract the loungers and travelers congregated there. Owllet did not come often to Poker City, but he knew it as well as some who lived there.

The train whose whistle he had heard was pushing through the first gorge east of the town.

A glance at the *personnel* of the people at the depot told Owllet that it was a passenger train.

All at once he beckoned to a boy, who ran forward and waited for commands at his horse's head.

"The 'Frisco Express, ain't it?" asked Owllet.

"It's nothing else, cap'n," was the answer.

"Lead my horse around the hotel an' hold him."

"Yes, sir."

Owlet slipped from the saddle and went toward the depot.

"He won't attempt to board 'er if I'm in the way!" he muttered, as he planted himself near the track and swept the crowd with an eagle eye.

The next moment the puffing train came in sight, and soon drew up before the crowd in waiting.

Owlet shrugged his shoulders and scrutinized everybody. Not a face escaped his searching look, and when the train came to a dead halt he walked forward and planted himself near the cars.

What Owllet wanted to show was his presence. More than one person noticed the bronzed and black-eyed man who stood at the car watching everybody with the eye of a falcon.

Owlet did not seem to breathe again until the train moved on.

Volcano Van and Lura had not boarded it, and with a grim smile that lingered at the corners of his mouth, he watched the cars till they dashed from sight.

"Is that the regular Express?" he asked a man who wore a broad-brimmed hat like his own.

"Ther reg'lar, cap'n," was the reply.

"Only passenger west a day now, eh?"

"Yes, but an extra went through about noon."

The intelligence seemed to take Owllet's breath.

"Hades an' horns!" he ejaculated. "An extra, eh? Whar from?"

"Ogden; had some o' the officers of the road on board, I heard."

"Did it stop hyer?"

"I b'lieve it did."

"Anybody board it?"

The man shook his head.

"I warn't hyer when she went through. Somebody said, though, that somebody got on, but hang me, if I know how it war."

Owlet walked toward the depot.

"An extra west, stopped here, took on some one. Jehu! has he escaped me?"

The depot of Poker City did not do much business. In the building more drinks were sold than tickets, and Owllet walked straight to the bartender whose left hand window looked out upon the track.

"I'd like to get a bit of information," remarked Owllet leaning on the counter.

"About Poker City?"

"About the extra that stopped hyer to-day."

"Oho! had the new directors on board. Bouncers I tell you. They left a fifty hyer for the boys to-night. Regular seraphs them fellows were, on my word."

"Hang the directors!" growled Owllet under his breath, then aloud.

"Did anybody board the train hyer?"

"The extra?"

"Yes."

"I don't think anybody did."

Owlet caught a breath of relief.

"Thar war somebody got on, Julius?" called out a voice from an adjoining room where a young man with a pale and feminine countenance was idly playing billiards by himself.

The sleuth of Puzzle Bar turned to the voice, and saw the speaker in the open door.

"A gent and lady got on. I saw 'em," the youth went on. "I heard one o' the directors say that it warn't a reg'lar train, but that, under the circumstances, they'd take 'em on."

"Under what circumstances?" asked Owllet.

"I didn't hear that, the young man talked to the director rather low."

Here was bitter disappointment. In one moment the hopes of the bonanza sleuth had been raised and dashed to the earth.

He went toward the young man as if he were about to crush him for imparting the information just given.

"What war the couple like?" he demanded.

"He war rather tall with a candy black eye; looked like he'd be a bad man in a tussle, too; she was pretty as women go nowadays, and seemed eager to get away."

"Not from the man?"

"No, on the train."

"There can be no mistake," muttered Owllet, and his brow darkened at the words. "I am a little too late. They must have had splendid horses, and he knew how to use 'em, too. Well, hang it all, I kin go back an' wait till they come for the prize; then I can pit cunning against cunning, or I can follow to 'Frisco and beat Colonel Bolt, alias Xenophon Zook, on his own ground. Three hours too late!"

He walked back to the bar.

"When does the next passenger leave for 'Frisco?"

"Eleven forty-five to-night."

"That's scrapin' midnight," smiled Owllet.

"It stops here always?"

"Oh, yes."

The young man was invited to the bar, where he was told to select his drink, and Owlet saw him fill his glass to the brim.

"I hope you'll catch 'em!" exclaimed the youth, lifting his liquor above his mouth ere he attacked it.

"Catch whom?" cried Owlet.

"Why, the young couple who boarded the extra. Of course you'll follow on the 'leven forty-five. I told Bill Blister, when I saw the young pair together, that that'd be somebody on the trail afore night. Bill knowed 'im."

"Ha!" and Owlet started forward. "Do you say your partner knew the man who boarded the extra?"

"That war the remark, cap'n," was the response.

"Who does he say he is?"

"A young fellow who's been shinin' around Eureka for some months, comes up hyer occasionally an' gives the faro-banks some tough work. Bill called 'im—let me see—Gilt-edged Jerry."

"Are you sure of that?" and Owlet leaned toward the young man with his eyes almost ready to leave his head. "I want no mistake made."

"I only tell you what Bill professes ter know."

"Whar is Bill?"

"Thar."

At that moment a genuine young sport, a little the worse for liquor, swaggered into the room.

"Hyer, Bill! This gentleman wants ter know for sartain whether the man what boarded the extra to-day war Gilt-edged Jerry," cried Owlet's comrade to the new arrival.

Bill Blister threw back his head and looked at Owlet, with a half-drunken leer that made the sleuth grate his teeth.

"Mebbe thar's suthin' in this?" he said.

"Thar's a good solid drink o' the bar's best," cried Owlet, who felt his impatience at his finger-tips. "Come, captain, I want to know something about those parties. Do you know that the man was Gilt-edged Jerry, of Eureka?"

"If that young lout tells you anything, it'll be a lie, captain!" thundered a voice, and the next moment a bearded man, carrying a huge six-shooter already cocked, strode into the room.

There was danger in his eye.

"See hyer!" cried Bill Blister, wheeling toward the new-comer. "I don't want to have it out hyer, Cold Deck."

"No, you miserable mountain skunk—you drunken poker thief—"

A cry of rage from the young sport's lips was the sudden interruption; he stepped suddenly back and threw one hand toward his hip.

The next moment the revolver of the big man came up, and then—a flash, a report, and a heavy fall!

Owlet would have interfered, but all this had been too quick for him.

He knew that it was only another mountain tragedy which would never be avenged, but it had sealed the lips of the only man who could settle the identity of the passenger of the extra. For Bill Blister, on the floor, had a bullet in his brain.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

WHAT OWLET WAITED FOR.

"UNLESS somebody can prove that the man who boarded the directors' train was Gilt-edged Jerry, I go to 'Frisco to-night. The person who knew lies yonder, dead. He didn't speak quick enough. Confound the man who shot him!"

Old Owlet had left the hotel where the swift tragedy had occurred, and had recovered his horse.

A crowd had already collected in front of the building, and some stern looks were directed at the man who had stained his hands with blood. The sleuth of Puzzle Bar had learned that Bill Blister, the victim, was a wild, drunken, good-for-nothing fellow, always insulting somebody, and very dangerous.

The man who had done the shooting told his story to the crowd, and the solitary billiard player and the bartender testified that the young ruffian was drawing when killed.

After this the slayer invited the crowd to the bar and within a few feet of the stiffening corpse all drank at his expense.

Owlet mounted and rode to another hotel where he had his steed stabled, and prepared to wait for the night train.

He was not entirely satisfied about the identity of the couple who had boarded the extra, and his doubts increased when the landlord of the Mountain Rose told him Gilt-edged Jerry the Eureka sport had been killed some months before.

This was perplexing, and when Owlet was directed to a man who would know for certain, he went off with the hope of getting some substantial information.

"Gilt-edged Jerry dead?" exclaimed the man when Owlet broached the subject nearest his heart. "I guess he's the liveliest mortal above ground. He was hyer to-day!"

"Left on the extra, didn't he?" inquired Owlet.

"Very likely he did. He was running off with a young girl from Eureka—"

"So I thought from what I gathered at the depot."

"I saw Jerry myself and talked with him, but he talked about goin' East," the man went on. "I rather think he did go to Ogden."

"You're liable to be mistaken, though," ventured the Puzzle Bar shadow.

"Do you want to catch 'em?"

"No. I want to make sure that the man who left Poker City to-day with a female was the Eureka sport; that is all."

"I'd bet my head on it, cap'n," exclaimed the man with a positiveness that dispelled Owlet's doubts, and he went back to the Mountain Rose pretty well satisfied.

As he walked into the small reception-room in one corner of which was the inevitable western bar, the landlord gave out a piece of startling news.

"That young couple won't never see 'Frisco!" he exclaimed. "The directors' car has been wrecked, thrown over the Lost Pine Bluffs—gone to the woodbine, engineer and all!"

Owlet started.

"It was a dispatch," continued the landlord, "a dispatch from the Express that left hyer an hour or so ago. All dead, I guess. What did Jackson say about the young chap what jined the directors hyer?"

"He said it was Gilt-edged Jerry the Eureka."

"Ha! I thought Jerry was dead."

"I know it!" exclaimed a broad-shouldered man who had listened to Owlet and the landlord. "The reason why I know it, cap'n, is that I saw 'im immediately after the affair."

"Jackson says he talked with Jerry to-day, that he was eloping with a Eureka belle."

"Jackson has been hoodwinked, ha! ha!" laughed the big man. "A man who has been dead for three months doesn't run off with young ladies. Well, I guess not."

Owlet could not repress a smile at the contradictions and confirmations he had received since coming to Poker City.

"But what did the dispatch say?" he asked, turning to the landlord.

"Not much as to particulars," was the answer. "Train off at Lost Pine Bluffs, all probably dead."

"Probably?" echoed the bonanza sleuth.

"That war the very word used."

Owlet was again thrown into perplexing uncertainty. At one time he was on the eve of going back to Puzzle Bar, the next moment he was determined to push forward.

He was determined to keep safe the secret of the bonanza mine, and if Volcano Van had taken it toward 'Frisco, he ought to pursue.

While the afternoon was dozing away Owlet tried to trace the Californian and Lura into Poker City. Nobody had seen them enter, but more than one person referred to the couple who had boarded the directors' car.

Volcano Van or Gilt-edged Jerry? Which?

The enigma was perplexing.

Night came at last, and Poker City swarmed with a life it did not know by day. The bronze miners came in from the mines to spend their rest in the various gaming dens scattered throughout the city. No more telegrams had come from the wrecked train. Owlet thought it was because the operator was a surly fellow who never imparted any information unless he was in extra good humor, which just then he did not possess.

The Puzzle Bar sleuth knew that Lost Pine Bluffs were near a mining town of considerable size, and he made up his mind to go thither on the night train. If he could there learn the identity of the couple that so puzzled him he would either push on to San Francisco or turn back.

At ten o'clock he had completed his arrangements, and was watching about the depot with all the nature of the sleuth-hound aroused.

Around him Poker City was full of life, and the voices of its motley population continually rung in his ears.

Eleven o'clock came, then the half-hour waned.

In fifteen minutes the night train, if on time, would pull in alongside the depot-hotel, and he would quietly board it for the ride to Lost Pine Bluffs, if not to the Golden City by the sea.

All at once the shriek of the locomotive startled Owlet. It was in the gorge beyond the camp, and several minutes would elapse before he could be a midnight passenger.

"Great Caesar!" suddenly ejaculated Owlet, as two horses came between him and the window of the bar-room. "The man at the Bluffs is Gilt-edged Jerry, for yonder is Volcano Van!"

Already a man had slid from one of the saddles and had turned to help his companion, a young girl, down.

"We have no time to lose," Owlet heard him say. "The horses—we'll let the pards of Poker City take care of them. Ah! the journey home commences here!"

The answer was an exclamation of delight by the young woman.

Owlet, with his deep, dark eyes ready to break

out in a blaze, was bending forward almost within clutching distance of his prey.

"Get to 'Frisco if you can!" he ejaculated. "I'd like to know whar you've been in hiding all this time. Afraid to take a day train, eh? Well, I don't blame you."

The roar and rumble of the approaching train was the only noise heard.

Owlet did not see it as it came dashing along, as if it intended to ignore Poker City. He saw only the man who had led the young person toward the wooden platform in front of the depot.

All at once the bonanza sleuth left his shadows and crept forward.

"I keep the secret safe or know why!" parted his lips. "Ha! ha! Volcano Van; if the depths of the mine can't hold you, the talons of Owlet will try their strength!"

There was no bustling among passengers as the train grew still, for there were none to push forward for precedence. Several men alighted in a minute, and Volcano Van helped Lura up the steps.

Old Owlet stood near like a tiger in waiting.

"I don't care for the girl. She can go back to Colonel Bolt or Xenophon Zook, as he used to be. I want the California bonanza-hunter and I've got 'im now!"

The next moment the bonanza sleuth executed a quick move forward.

The conductor who had just consulted with the operator concerning the accident to the directors' train had called out "All aboard," and Volcano Van had reached the first step.

In the space of a flash the hand of Owlet fell upon Volcano Van's arm, and the next second he was jerked back with tigerish emphasis.

"What means this?" cried the Californian, wheeling upon his assailant.

"Business!" and then he caught sight of Owlet and his blazing eyes.

"Ho! it is my old friend Owlet!" he exclaimed. "I am going back to 'Frisco—"

"Now?"

"On, this train, Owlet."

"We'll see about that!" came through the watch-dog's teeth. "The girl can go alone! Volcano Van, you will remain behind for a spell."

The train started at this moment and Volcano Van felt the fingers of Owlet sink deeper into his arm.

He lunged forward almost throwing the mountain detective off his feet.

"My grip is death!" laughed Owlet. "It holds better than the bonanza mine!"

Then began a struggle which from the onset was desperate. Neither could draw their weapons; it was arm against arm, man to man.

The train was gaining speed; but it could be caught by a good run down the track.

Suddenly Owlet was charged with an impetuosity perfectly irresistible. All the strength of Volcano Van was in the new tactics and the fresh assault. Owlet went back, he tripped, wavered, and his hold relaxed!

The next moment he was shaken loose, and then the clinched hand of the Californian was lifted.

Owlet tried to avoid the blow, but swish! the hand struck him fairly in the face, and he reeled away!

Volcano Van let slip a cry of victory and turned toward the train. Like a young stag he bounded down the track, and thanks to his endurance and speed he caught the guard and drew himself up.

"The second time! By heavens! the man is a hummer. I have waited all day for what?—A broken nose and empty hands! I can go back to Puzzle Bar. Mebbe I'm needed thar. Jehosaphat! I feel like riding rough shod over the world."

Of course the speaker was Owlet and when he turned away with a growl the Night Express was speeding toward 'Frisco.

He had found Volcano Van and had lost him.

"Now," grated Owlet as he walked moodily toward the Mountain Rose, "if Bowie Bart has failed to obey my commands I'll discipline him. The bonanza secret is rushing toward 'Frisco, but the mine is ours still. Something tells me that I'm needed at the Bar."

"You ar', cap'n," exclaimed a voice, and a man reached the sleuth's side. "I am just in from the camp. Bowie Bart is king, Madge has saved Nevada Nat, and—"

"I'm off for Puzzle Bar!" cried Owlet.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A MAN FOR THE HOUR.

SOME hours after these events a grim-looking man rode quietly into bonanza camp.

Another day had just departed and the Golden Fleece was enjoying a rush of custom which was keeping Nantez busy.

Without ceremony we will inform the reader that the rider just mentioned was the Sleepless Eye.

Owlet had come back from his perplexing adventures at Poker City, and empty-handed, too.

The man who had ridden all the way from Puzzle Bar to tell him about Bowie Bart's usurpation, Madge's temporary triumph and a few

other things, had remained behind, as if he had feared to risk himself among the toughs he had betrayed.

Owlet had an eye for everything as he came down the narrow street between the cabins. He saw the lighted window of the Golden Fleece and heard a boisterous laugh which seemed to tell him what was transpiring inside.

"The girl first. I guess she knows all," muttered Owlet and soon after his return he opened the door of Madge's abode.

"Captain Owlet, you are just too late," she exclaimed as the penetrating eyes of the bonanza sleuth found her.

"Too late for what?"

"For the burial," answered Madge.

"King Romeo is under ground, then?"

"Yes. It was done to-day."

Owlet came forward.

"What about the living?" he asked. "Who is king of Puzzle Bar?"

"They have acknowledged Bowie Bart."

"Gold Grip with the rest?"

"Yes."

"By Jehu! I thought he'd stand the racket," growled Owlet. "Madge, I hear that you interfered again?"

"I did. I got a stay of two days," replied the girl, a flash of pride lighting up her eyes. "Nevada Nat shall not swing for a deed he never did. For once Captain Owlet accused the wrong man."

"You can say that with impunity," exclaimed the bronze sleuth a slight smile at his lips. "The wrong man, Madge? Who is the right one?"

"Caliban."

"Ah! the toad we have harbored for years; the hunchback King Romeo kept in camp under the plea that dwarfs are good luck! You want to find Caliban, my child?"

"He shall be found! The Satanic imp shall stand between Nat and the mountain rope. You have come back to find him for me, haven't you, Captain Owlet?"

The detective drew back and looked at her.

"Me find Caliban to prove that I have made a mistake?" he ejaculated. "Why, this would disgrace me for life!"

"Very well! then I will find the dwarf myself."

"You, Madge?" and before the girl could answer he caught her arm. "Where is Nat?" he asked.

"He has been here all day. I have told him to stay. The trails about Puzzle Bar I have hunted for myself. I came in just awhile ago."

"Out after Caliban?"

"Out after Caliban."

"Do you expect to find the hunchback in the vicinity of his crime, calling him guilty?"

"I do not know," answered Madge, and then quickly continued: "If, as you have said, the toad had a passion for me would he go far?"

Old Owlet could not reply before a light rap sounded on the door and the girl went forward with a quick glance at him.

Owlet stepping back among the shadows got a glimpse of a figure in dark shirt and a banded hat.

"What is it, Hilliard?" asked the girl at the door.

"They say Owlet has come back," was the reply. "I came to ask if you have seen him."

The girl did not betray the gold camp watch who almost touched her.

"Why do you ask, Hilliard?" she went on.

"They want to find him."

"Who do?"

"The new king and his council."

"Why?"

"Didn't Owlet post Gold Grip's proclamation, and don't they know that if he comes back King Bart's reign may not be prosperous? We can't hold the camp together under Bart. In less than twenty-four hours, unless something happens, the bonanza secret will be on its way to the four quarters of the compass for the men are going to leave."

"Are you for Owlet?"

"I am for keeping the secret."

The next moment Owlet stepped forward and confronted Hilliard, who greeted him with an exclamation of astonishment.

"The king wants me, does he?" he said calmly, but plainly through his teeth. "Well, Owlet wants the king!"

"You don't want to push things," answered the giant sport cautiously. "There are but four men in Puzzle Bar who are not ready to cheer when Bart's hat goes up."

"Does the estimate include Hilliard?"

The sport answered with a bow.

For a moment the sleuth of the mountain camp seemed to weigh affairs in silence.

The secret was more than ever at stake; the mine which he had guarded for years was to be run by a man whose sole ambition was to rule and make money.

"Without Bowie Bart we can successfully fight the 'Frisco league and save the secret. With him King of Puzzle Bar, the secret is lost."

These two sentences formed rapidly in Owlet's mind. He shut his hands with stern emphasis as they crystallized and when he threw up his head and looked at Hilliard he was more than ready.

"Where are the traitors?" he asked, and his lips were scarcely stirred by the syllables.

"The boys are at the Golden Fleece."

"And Bowie Bart?"

"I left him there."

"Madge, my child, after this affair, you shall have help," continued Owlet, turning to the girl.

"You don't want to miss the play," was the quick response. "They are all for the new king there."

"We will see how they stand in an hour from now. Will you go down, Hilliard?"

The giant of Puzzle Bar hesitated.

"Ah! I see! You don't want to compromise yourself. That is right, Hilliard. I wouldn't have you do it for the bonanza itself. Do they know I am in camp?"

"They suspicion."

"They will know before long," smiled Owlet.

The following moment with a wave of his hand he walked away, leaving Hilliard and Madge alone.

"His entrance will be the signal for a volley!" cried the girl, springing to Hilliard's side. "No one man can overthrow the kingdom of Puzzle Bar. A hand of iron cannot crush this rebellion."

"Let him try it," exclaimed Hilliard, looking down into the girl's face. "I saw him crush a mutiny worse than this."

"But not here."

"No. It was years ago, but Owlet has lost none of his power, none of his courage."

Nevada Madge went to the door and looked out.

"Somebody just glided away," she exclaimed, coming back to Hilliard. "He was at the window."

"Mebbe it was Caliban," smiled Hilliard.

"I hope it was," answered the girl. "I shall give myself no rest until I have given the murderer of King Romeo up to justice."

At this moment a few yards from the cabin stood a dwarfish figure with a pair of brilliant eyes fastened on the window.

"She is as pretty as ever, and Caliban will possess the mountain jewel over all the hunters. She heard him run away, but she does not know that the toad of Puzzle Bar as she calls him is about to claim his queen."

These words from the figure in the dark were supplemented by a laugh full of victory, and a moment later the spot was deserted.

Meantime one of the coolest men in the gold country was walking toward the Golden Fleece.

He seemed in a hurry to reach the saloon yet he did not push forward with any undue haste.

Walking straight to the door he pushed it open and stepped into the light.

A dozen men were at the bar, a few occupied the tables in the middle of the place, but all saw him at once.

"Captain Owlet!" exclaimed nearly every man, but there was one who did not speak.

It was toward this silent person who stood erect at the counter that Owlet walked, but not with his eyes fixed upon him.

"What'll you sample, captain?" asked Nantez as Owlet came alongside.

There was no answer, for the next second the left hand of the bonanza sleuth caught Bowie Bart's wrist and he leaned forward with a hiss on his tongue.

"Rebell! traitor! you're no longer King o' Puzzle Bar!" he cried. "Hunt a crown elsewhere, or leave the camp you can never run!"

The cry that parted Bowie Bart's lips sounded like the roar of a wounded lion.

Owlet pushed him from him and then threw his hand toward his hip. At the same moment the hand of Bart sought his belt.

The following second the two men straightened on the floor, and then came the shot!

A shot and a cry, then a man pitching against the wall.

"I had to do it," said Owlet under the lifting smoke. "The bonanza secret must be kept at all hazards!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

UNCONQUERED.

COOL and collected before the startled denizens of the gold-camp stood the mountain sleuth, the fingers of his right hand still encircling the deadly revolver.

Under a table where he had dropped with a thud lay the usurper of Puzzle Bar.

The toughs looked at Old Owlet with flashes of indignation. A spark would set off the magazine for many a bronze finger rested nervously on the trigger.

"Gentlemen o' Puzzle Bar, we must keep the bonanza secret safe," continued the guardian. "The king o' the camp must be a man who has no ambition beyond that. Before long we will have to stand shoulder to shoulder in a common cause. The spy who came from 'Frisco has gone back." And Owlet ground his teeth over his failure at Poker City. "Give me assurance that there shall be no more usurpations of authority here, and the war will be carried to 'Frisco and fought out there single-handed by Captain Owlet of Puzzle Bar! Duty demanded the death o' Bowie Bart. If he has a friend who wants to avenge him let him step forth!"

Silence was the answer and Owlet waited at

the counter with the semblance of a smile at his lips.

For several minutes the stillness was not broken, but all at once the voice of a man rung out in the crowd.

"The bonanza first, boys! We must save it in spite of the new king's death!"

The next moment the crowd moved forward and when he looked into the eyes before him Owlet knew that his desperate play had not failed.

"I guess I won the play," he ejaculated, opening the door of Madge's cabin a few minutes later. "The boys—"

He paused abruptly, for Madge was not present to greet him; the little cabin was empty.

Owlet walked away and went over to Gold Grip's abode.

"I know all," said the sport. "You played a bold hand with the chances against you. But the secret is safe."

"Safe! There will be no rebellion, and the men who had been won over to Bowie Bart will stay. But Nevada Nat must stand trial. The two days granted him for Madge's sake end tomorrow."

"The man is innocent!" exclaimed Gold Grip.

Owlet made no answer.

"I see. You don't want it said that you ever made a mistake, nor that you ran down the wrong man. Captain Owlet, I found under King Romeo's cot more documents than his last proclamation."

"What ar' they?"

Gold Grip walked to his brass-bound chest in one corner of the cabin and took out a small packet.

"You are not to burn these papers as you did the others," he continued, coming forward.

"You must promise me that first?"

"I do," answered Owlet. "Those papers shall not touch the flame," and he thrust his hand across the table for the packet held by the miner.

"Look at that one first," remarked Gold Grip, extending a paper. "Remember, as you read, that Romeo and I were brothers."

For a minute Owlet read in silence then he looked up suddenly.

"Great heavens! did you know this before?" he exclaimed.

"I have suspected it," was the answer.

"So have I. When Selden the Southwest rancher was killed years ago the crime was put on the shoulders of two men—Captain Xenophon Zook, and the boss of our camp."

"What did you think, Owlet?" asked Gold Grip.

"I thought then that Zook was the man, but long since I changed my mind. Xenophon Zook drifted around for some years and finally settled down in 'Frisco where as Colonel Bolt he is president of the Gold Eagle Bank, and the man who wants the secret of our bonanza."

"What became of Mrs. Selden and her children, the two little girls?"

Gold Grip's voice betrayed his deep curiosity. "The mother is dead; the children—what! is it possible that you saw no resemblance when they were together hver?"

A cry burst from Gold Grip's throat.

"I see it now! Lura Bolt and Madge of Puzzle Bar—"

"Are the children of Selden the rancher who was killed by King Romeo?"

"There shall be restitution," ejaculated Gold Grip.

"Restitution of what kind?" cried Owlet leaning forward as he crushed the paper in his hand.

"I see now that the location of our mine was one of Selden's secrets, the one which probably cost him his life," the Nevada sleuth went on. "King Romeo would never tell where he got the old diagram which gave us the clew."

"He tells it in these papers," cried Gold Grip, holding up the packet. "Before he died he confesses to all, to the crime that orphaned the rancher's children, to the theft of the diagram, and even to attempts to direct suspicion against Xenophon Zook. Owlet, we can't keep the accursed thing. The bonanza o' Puzzle Bar belongs not to us—"

"Hush!" thundered the bonanza sleuth. "You forget that I am enlisted for life! You forget that a man is lying dead among the tables of the Golden Fleece, that the secret was considered in peril when I killed him there! We don't give it up yet. I stand by it to the last."

"It belongs to the children of Selden," said Gold Grip, unmoved by Owlet's fierce outburst.

"It belongs to the men who hold it!" was the answer. "Old Owlet stands between the bonanza secret and the man who would render it valueless to Puzzle Bar. Blood has been shed for it, and I have given the best years of my life to guarding it. It shall not be given up; not while Owlet has cunning left, not while he has an arm to defend it! Shall I appeal to the pards of Puzzle Bar? What do they care for the heirs of a man they have never heard of? Give Madge the life of Nevada Nat; that will satisfy her! She'd sooner catch Caliban than walk into full possession of the golden secret."

Old Owlet threw the paper on the table and stepped back.

"You three brothers have had singular careers!" he went on with a smile. "You and Romeo have profited by the death of the man who died years ago because he was supposed to have a lot of valuable papers. The younger brother turns up as the agent-spy of Colonel Bolt, and his mission is to find out the big bonanza secret. It is stranger than fiction, eh, Gold Grip? I do not wonder that you stood by Volcano Van when my traps menaced him. Blood is thicker than water, ha, ha! Now you would give up the secret; you want to surrender it to two girls who can live without it. Owlet says no! He holds in his hands the cards that can win against the biggest odds. The men of Puzzle Bar are at his back. The secret is to be fought for if Colonel Bolt turns a lot o' 'Frisco tigers loose on us! Gold Grip, there is more than one trail out o' Puzzle Bar. If you cannot stay with the future I have pictured before you, you can depart."

"All I ask is justice, Owlet," answered the miner.

"Which means the throwing up o' the hand we've held for years, and the abandonment o' the Bar to the foe! No! when you men, as the Branded Seven, took Old Owlet from his mountain shanty where he was happy and made him the watch-dog and defender of the bonanza secret, you changed his nature for life! The man who gives out the secret or who turns his back on the Seven must feel the hand of the life-long sleuth!"

Owlet was at the door as the last word fell from his lips.

Gold Grip gave him a look full of resentment and feeling.

"Ah! Captain Owlet, they want you at the Golden Fleece!" cried a man who reached the sleuth's side as he left the cabin.

"What has happened there?"

"The girl, Madge! She has found Caliban, the dwarf. Awhile ago she dragged the serpent-eyed imp into the house and told us that she had found the murderer o' King Romeo."

Old Owlet uttered a cry and bounded away.

As he came in sight of the square in front of the famous resort he saw lights and a surging crowd.

Several shouts of recognition greeted him as he came up.

"Look yonder! I found him and they took him from me!" cried a voice as a hand closed on his own and he threw a look down into the face of Nevada Madge.

The girl was pointing toward a body that dangled from the lynchers' limb, and in the circle made by the crowd.

"That is Caliban!" cried Owlet.

"It is the toad of Puzzle Bar—the right man, as you know, Captain Owlet!"

Owlet's eyes got a satisfied look as he went forward.

"Oh, he confessed, cap'n!" exclaimed a dozen voices. "We took 'im from the girl and give 'im ther noose."

A minute later the sleuth of Puzzle Bar stood at the girl's side.

"Whar did you find him?"

"Prowling about like a wolf. I stole a march on him and forced him into the Golden Fleece. The wronged man shall not be tried now."

"He shall not," answered Owlet, and he walked away.

"I shall now make the secret forever safe!" he exclaimed. "Gold Grip will do nothing—he dare not!"

That same night a man on horseback rode westward, from Puzzle Bar. He was alone, and his countenance cold and stern told that he was on one of the most important missions of his life.

The man was Owlet, and his face was turned toward 'Frisco.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

FOLLOWED TO THE END.

ON, still on!

There seemed no rest for the rider of the lithe-limbed steed that cantered out of Puzzle Bar and left it and the bonanza mine behind.

No rest from the saddle till Poker City was reached, and then it was a leap from the stirrups to the platform of the 'Frisco Express.

This time there was no Bill Blister to declare that Gilt edged Jerry and his sweetheart had boarded the train, no doubts about the passengers of the directors' train and no tussle with Volcano Van at the depot.

We can push ahead a little in our romance and inform the reader that the 'Frisco agent-spy reached the Gold Eagle Bank in safety, and that Lura was restored to Colonel's Bolt's home.

But Owlet was still on the trail, and the time was near for the sleuth of Puzzle Bar, the Sleepless Eye of Nevada, to play his last card.

Colonel Bolt was delighted; he had reason to congratulate himself, for the third spy sent to the dangerous ground had come back alive—not only alive, but with Lura and the secret!

Gray Gid, the banker's partner, was also in good humor. He saw just ahead new riches, and another turn at the wheel of fortune.

He had reached it all by no risk of his own;

Volcano Van, the man of his selection, had raked the golden chestnuts from the fire!

Gideon Galt did not see the man who saw him emerge from the Gold Eagle Bank, one day not long after Owlet's last departure from Puzzle Bar. When he started up-town he had a man at his heels, a human watch-dog, with restless eyes and noiseless step.

It was getting late in the afternoon, and Gideon kept on until he was stopped by a man with whom he began to talk.

The human trailer came up unperceived, and by using the arts of the practiced detective he managed to hear something which interested him.

"We set out day after to-morrow," said Gray Gid to his friend. "Of course under the leadership of Volcano Van, who has discovered the secret."

"What if Volcano Van should die before that time?"

"Heavens! we can't think of that!" cried Gideon Galt. "The secret he ferreted out is his secret now. He is keeping it until we reach the battle-ground."

"Hasn't he imparted it to Colonel Bolt?"

"No. I have seen the diagram he has of the mine, but the location of the bonanza he holds himself."

"Where is he?"

"Sometimes at the colonel's where he seems to have taken a fancy to the girl he brought back, and sometimes on the street."

"He runs some risk, I should say."

"Not much risk to the chances he took when he went to Puzzle Bar. I guess the camp ferret, Owlet, won't try to play any card here."

The man who was listening to these words let a cynical smile appear at the corners of his lips, and when he walked off it broadened there.

"Day after to-morrow, eh?" he muttered.

"I haven't struck 'Frisco too soon. They are to come down on the bonanza like a pack o' wolves, and Volcano Van is to show them the wealth I have sworn no man outside of the Seven shall ever touch. Will he guide them back? Will they open the bonanza and turn Puzzle Bar into Colonel Bolt's bank? We shall see!"

Gideon Galt had made no foolish assertion when he said that Volcano Van, the Californian sport, had found the banker's home an attractive place. Perhaps it was because Lura had bright eyes and a pleasing voice. We know it was not because the banker had sent him into the jaws of death for gain.

The hours went by on airy wing to the young sport, and the time was near at hand for him to lead a picked company over the trail for a final tussle for the Nevada mine.

There were papers out, charging King Romeo with the murder of Selden, the Arizona rancher, and with the theft of the original diagram of the mine. It was also said that the bonanza belonged to Lura, now openly declared to be Selden's child, and while Colonel Bolt said that the crusade was to be taken in her interests, it was in reality in his own. For Butler Bolt was a schemer despite his position, and a fit companion of Gideon Galt, the gentleman tough.

For some time keen eyes had watched the banker's house, and Volcano Van's every footstep had been persistently dogged.

"He never goes back! By the eternal heavens! he remains in 'Frisco, and the secret he brought from Puzzle Bar he shall keep forever!"

Old Owlet said this, and the spy of Nevada was not powerless in the gold-coast city.

"So we go to-morrow night, eh?" asked a man who glided up to Volcano Van and accosted him near the entrance to the Occidental Hotel.

The agent-spy looked at him, and saw a person with a full black beard, and well dressed.

"Ah! you don't know me? Well, maybe not," continued the speaker. "I'm one o' Colonel Bolt's picked pards. You are Volcano Van, the man who is to lead us. Are you certain thar ar' no black sheep in the flock, cap'n?"

"I ought to be," smiled Van.

"Wal, I hope ye'r' right, but I don't know," replied the man, doubtfully.

"What do you know?"

"Not hyer, cap'n," and the speaker lowered his voice. "If we could find a quiet place—"

"Come to my room!"

Volcano Van led the man to his room on the fourth floor.

He had seen all the men who had been picked for the enterprise, and there were a dozen with black beards and bright eyes like this one.

Volcano Van reached up to turn on the gas after he crossed the threshold of the room.

All at once the man leaped at him and clutched his throat.

"The game ends in 'Frisco, Volcano Van!" hissed a voice, as he was borne back. "You escaped me at Poker City, but I hold you hyer!"

It was Owlet!

The thought flashed through the sport's mind before he touched the wall.

Nobody heard the struggle in the dark room; nobody saw the foes who writhed back and forth over the soft carpet, now Owlet uppermost, now Volcano Van claiming the mastery.

More than the Nevada bonanza was in the scales. Life itself was the prize.

At last a man rose panting from the floor.

He stood erect a moment, then staggered across the room and threw up the window.

For several moments he stood there, inhaling the fresh air that came up from the bay, then he walked back and held a match over a man stretched on the carpet.

"A tiger in human skin!" he ejaculated, when he saw that the prostrate man was breathing. "I guess the bonanza secret has been doubly earned."

He locked the door behind him when he went out, and, a few minutes later, two police came and picked up a half-senseless person.

The victor in the struggle went down on the street and walked rapidly away.

He was not followed.

As for the man left behind, he was revived at the police station, where somebody called him Owlet, of Puzzle Bar.

"Where is he?" asked Owlet, glaring about him.

"The man who fought you at the Occidental?"

"Yes."

"He walked away, apparently unhurt."

The lips of the sleuth quivered with suppressed emotion.

"After all, failure!" he muttered. "After years of sworn guardianship the secret is lost! Let them take the bonanza, but may they inherit with it the curse of Old Owlet, of Puzzle Bar!"

That night nobody watched the man who was kept at the station charged with deadly assault.

In the morning some one found him lying on his face in the cell.

In one of the stiffened hands was a piece of iron, and its sharp point had traced on the floor this one sentence:

"Owlet never survives defeat!"

Thus in the night, in the heart of 'Frisco, when no man watched, died at the end of his last game, the Sleepless Eye of the mountains!

It was Volcano Van's fortune to lead the picked men to Puzzle Bar, where they accomplished their purpose with little trouble, for Owlet being no more, the mountain pards had no one to lead them, and Gold Grip's influence was against bloodshed.

It was then fully known that Madge was Lura's own sister, and the pards at the bar declared that she should share equally with the banker's ward.

In the course of time the queen of the camp became Nevada Nat's wife, and the handsome man who went into the jaws of death with the chances against him, led Lura Selden to the altar.

There came a time when Red Crest, the red miner, came back to Puzzle Bar for revenge, but he found Volcano Van in charge there, and nobody for him to fight.

The bonanza turned out to be worth playing for. It still further enriched Colonel Bolt and Gray Gid, and made the long-separated sisters happy, but nobody connected with it has forgotten the terrible espionage of the Sleepless Eye.

THE END.

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